

OBERTO

Oxford Brookes: Exploring Research Trends in Opera

OPÉRA SANS FRONTIÈRES: MUSICIANS AND MIGRATION IN A GLOBALISED WORLD



Oxford Brookes University, Oxford

Tuesday 12th September 2017

Programme of the day

9-9.45 Registration

9.45-10 Welcome (Dr Barbara Eichner and Dr Alexandra Wilson)

10-11 SESSION 1: Singers and suitcases

Flora Willson (King's College London): 'Celebrity Migrations: Nellie Melba, *bel canto* and the borders of the operatic canon'

Mirikam Beier (Universität Salzburg): 'The Pirker correspondence as a source for the mobility of *operisti* in the eighteenth century'

11-11.30 Tea and Coffee

11.30-1 SESSION 2A: Writing about crossing borders

Charlotte Bentley (University of Cambridge): 'Translating nineteenth-century New Orleans: the operatic travel writing of Charles Jobey'

Eric Schneeman (University of the Incarnate World): 'Transgressing the German "Border": Giacomo Meyerbeer's Italian career and the German press of the nineteenth century'

Chenyin Tang (University of Southampton): 'Making Opera? Making Empire?'

11.30-1 SESSION 2B: Exiles and émigrés

Nils Grosch (Universität Salzburg): 'Alfred Einstein's view on music theatre and cultural mobility'

Malcolm Noble (University of Leicester): 'Rudolf Bing and the establishment of the Edinburgh Festival in civic, national and international perspective'

Norbert Meyn (Royal College of Music): 'Singing a Song in a Foreign Land: Challenges and opportunities in opera for Émigré musicians from Nazi-ruled Europe in Britain'

1-2.15 Lunch

2.15-3.45 SESSION 3: Protectionism

Gwen D'Amico (City University of New York): 'The Trading with the Enemy Act: the fate of German singers stranded in New York during World War I'

Russell Burdekin (independent scholar): 'Rodwell's *Letter to the Musicians of Great Britain*: an attempt to build a bastion for English opera'

Alexandra Wilson (Oxford Brookes University): 'Citizens of nowhere? Opera singers and cultural protectionism in 1920s Britain'

3.45-4.15 Tea and coffee break

SESSION 4: Panel Discussion

John Allison (Editor *Opera Magazine*)

Thomas Elwin (Tenor)

Christopher Gillett (Tenor)

Kara McKechnie (Dramaturge and Lecturer, University of Leeds)

Abstracts (in alphabetical order)

Mirijam Beier (Universität Salzburg): 'The Pirker correspondence as a source for the mobility of operisti in the eighteenth century'

In the eighteenth century Italian opera was the dominant cultural phenomenon throughout Europe. It was present at the courts, in the great centres of power and commerce and, by means of travelling opera troupes, in smaller cities without a royal seat. The forms of production varied depending upon location, from the lavish requirements of court opera instigated by a sovereign to public opera managed by an impresario. Mobility was thus an inherent part of the European opera business, not only due to the changes of location but also through changes within the different forms of employment in the operatic system. Previous research has emphasised the importance of the singers, but the lack of primary sources, and in particular personal statements, makes it difficult to retrace their careers. This gap is partly closed by the mid-eighteenth century Pirker correspondence. These letters provide insights into the operatic business from the perspective of a singer, Marianne Pirker, and her husband Franz Pirker, a violinist, who in addition performed different tasks within the operatic business.

This paper will explore how mobility is addressed within the correspondence, focusing on travel topics and Marianne Pirker's reflections regarding her next career steps. Marianne Pirker's European career, traced through her correspondence, thus provides an intriguing example of a singer's career and mobility in the eighteenth century.

Charlotte Bentley (University of Cambridge). 'Translating nineteenth-century New Orleans: the operatic travel writing of Charles Jobey'

For much of the nineteenth century, opera was a fundamental part of social life in New Orleans. Between 1819 and 1859, the francophone troupe of the city's Théâtre d'Orléans, recruited annually from Europe, performed operas as often as four nights a week. While aspects of the theatre's repertoire have already been explored to varying extents, little attention has been paid to the way in which New Orleans fitted into expanding transatlantic networks of operatic production and reception, or to how its vibrant opera scene shaped perceptions of the city within the United States and abroad.

In this paper, I want to explore a surprising source of insight into these previously unexplored areas: the writings of Charles Jobey, a Frenchman and little-known author, who spent several years as the principal bassoonist in the Théâtre d'Orléans orchestra. Published in Paris in the mid-nineteenth century, these works, with their intricate blurring of fact and fiction, reveal that there was a complex entanglement between opera and questions of local, national and global identity for the people of New Orleans; at the same time, they use opera as a literary device through which to 'translate' a foreign locale for a Parisian readership. Focussing on two of Jobey's stories, *L'Amour d'un nègre* (1860) and *Le Lac Cathahoula* (1861), I argue that the scenes featuring New Orleans's operatic life open up new perspectives on European visions of the United States, and allow us to examine the nature of transatlantic cultural interaction in the period.

Russell Burdekin (Independent scholar): 'Rodwell's Letter to the Musicians of Great Britain: an attempt to build a bastion for English opera'

In the autumn of 1833, George H.N. Rodwell published a long and detailed pamphlet in which he put forward a plan to erect a "Grand National Opera" in London with the aim of providing a home for works by "Native Musical Talent". He had been brought to this by a number of adverse factors that he saw English composers labouring under including the lack of opportunity and the inadequate remuneration when it did arise, both seen as exacerbated by the favouritism given to foreign composers and musicians. These frustrations were widely shared among commentators and were part of a long history of discontent about what was seen as the scant respect and support given to English music, particularly by the upper classes, at a time of unprecedented social, economic and political upheaval. As well as a plan for a dedicated English opera house with the later publication of a share prospectus to fund it, Rodwell also proffered some solutions that drew on French practice. However, the plea fell on stony ground and despite a number of attempts over the years to institute some form of his idea they all came to nought. As well as exploring the issues giving rise to Rodwell's Letter, the details of his plan and the likely effectiveness of his proposed solutions, the paper considers whether his and the later failures were due, in part, to a fundamental misunderstanding of English audiences and an assumption of English exceptionalism.

Gwen D'Amico (City University of New York): 'The Trading with the Enemy Act: The fate of German singers stranded in New York City during World War I'

On April 7, 1917, the United States officially declared war upon Germany. In a twist of operatic irony, the announcement coincided with the traditional Good Friday performance of Wagner's *Parsifal* at New York's Metropolitan Opera. Immediately, German singers, stars who had added to the Met's success and who had achieved great celebrity in this country, were suddenly stranded in a hostile land, under suspicion, and labeled as "enemy aliens." Prior to this, owing to increasing anti-German sentiment, Met General Manager Giulio Gatti-Casazza and Chairman Otto H. Kahn sought a remedy to the growing problem with both the German singers and the German repertoire. The solution came from President Woodrow Wilson and the Trading with the Enemy Alien Act. This act immediately nullified all contracts with the German singers. But what would be their fate during the war? And further, what was waiting for them at the war's completion?

This study will focus on two separate aspects of this dark episode. First it will cover the callous machinations on the part of the Met and its various attempts to cancel the German singers (and by extension, the German repertoire) in as cheaply and efficiently a manner as possible. The second aspect will focus on the singers themselves. How did they survive as enemies in a country at war? Using correspondence, newspaper accounts, and personal memoirs, this study will reconstruct the short history of the fate of German singers stranded in a hostile city during World War I.

Nils Grosch (Universität Salzburg): 'Alfred Einstein's view on music theatre and cultural mobility'

The paper examines Alfred Einstein's perspective on opera composers and their *oeuvre*, especially through the lens of his own situation as a refugee, as well as the contrasting paradigm shift toward cultural nationalism during the Third Reich. In his writings of the 1930s and 1940s, especially in his Gluck and Mozart biographies as well as in his 'nationalism' essay and in his edition of *Briefe deutscher Musiker*, which was a specific product of exile publishing, he deconstructed the research paradigm of 'Stammesforschung' (literally 'pedigree research') and argued for a flexible understanding of the outputs and careers of Handel, Gluck, Mozart, Wagner and others. In letters to Stefan Zweig, Nicolas Slonimsky and many others, he commented on the political implications of writing music history under the tension between (in Greenblatt's words) fixity and mobility.

Using Stephen Greenblatt's 'Cultural Mobility' manifesto as model for analysis, I will offer a reading of Einstein's published works and his private letters that sounds out Einstein's view on music theatre concerning the significance of his 'mobile' perspective for the academic discourse of his (and later) times.

Norbert Meyn (Royal College of Music): 'Singing a Song in a Foreign Land: Challenges and opportunities in opera for *Émigré* musicians from Nazi-ruled Europe in Britain'

This paper will present recent findings from the *Singing a Song in a Foreign Land* project at the Royal College of Music, in particular from oral history research recorded in 2015/16. Interviewees have included Dame Janet Baker (who talked in great detail about her *émigré* teacher Helene Isepp), opera singer and vocal teacher Laura Sarti, the children of composer and opera conductor Peter Gellhorn and legendary language coach Geraldine Frank, all of whom had a connection with Glyndebourne Opera and other UK companies.

Norbert Meyn will discuss some common elements in the experience of these *Émigrés* working in opera in the UK and look at how they dealt with challenges and opportunities.

Malcolm Noble (University of Leicester): 'Rudolf Bing and the establishment of the Edinburgh International Festival in civic, national and international perspective'

In 1947 the first Edinburgh International Festival was held. Rudolf Bing, one of the many outstanding artists who fled 1930s Germany, persuaded Edinburgh Town Council to undertake a project of exceptional civic ambition. It was fundamentally Scottish in its nature, an attempt to bring crowds to Edinburgh; yet its scope was firmly international: artists, productions, orchestras and audiences travelled far. Bing intended to for Edinburgh and Glyndebourne to share productions – and therefore costs, a foretaste of the dominance of co-productions. Bing seized the moment, as Salzburg and other established European festivals struggled in the post-war economic climate. For the new festival Bing secured funds on different levels: Scotland was considered sufficiently foreign to warrant British Council funding; the Arts Council eventually provided a grant, and a large amount of municipal money underpinned the scheme.

Bing's career as an administrator was exceptional. He was instrumental in establishing Glyndebourne, yet it was Edinburgh that served as springboard for him. The Scottish festival thrived and soon Bing took perhaps the biggest job in opera: General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera. In 2017 the new opera house he built at the Lincoln Centre celebrates its fiftieth anniversary. At his hands, the Met made New York the undoubted capital of a global operatic world. This paper discusses Bing's Edinburgh festival in civic, national, and transnational perspectives, in terms of financial, social and cultural capital.

Eric Schneeman (University of the Incarnate World): 'Transgressing the German "Border": Giacomo Meyerbeer's Italian Career and the German Press of the Nineteenth Century'

Research into the 19th-century German reception of Giacomo Meyerbeer reveals that many of the writings about his Italian career mixed an anti-Semitic bias with an apprehension over Germany's cultural and political future. Such critics as Carl Maria von Weber, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and Ignaz von Mosel, for example, presented their readers with an idiosyncratic vision of Germany in which its backward culture and stagnant political policies forced its most talented musicians to find work under the Italian sunshine. This anxiety among German intellectuals and music critics led to the circulation of many false or misleading anecdotes about Meyerbeer and his supposed "rejection" of his Teutonic heritage in exchange for instant fame.

My paper contextualizes the German reception of Meyerbeer's Italian career and operas within a widespread disillusionment over Germany's inability to unify, culturally and politically. While scholars have focused on the anti-Semitism in Schumann's and Wagner's critiques of Meyerbeer in the 1830s and 1860s, my examination demonstrates that attacks against Meyerbeer emerged earlier in the German press — beginning with the composer's departure for Italy in 1817. Focusing on writings from 1818 to 1830, my analysis reveals that German writers' perceptions of Meyerbeer and Italy reflected their uncertainties about German nationhood, and dealt freely in contemporary stereotypes about Jewishness and its inherent "borderless cosmopolitanism." I argue that the anti-Semitism in these and later critiques was a cause for Meyerbeer's precarious position in the political, cultural landscape of his time, as well as his contested place in the music-historical narrative of the 19th century.

Chenyin Tang (University of Southampton): 'Making Opera? Making Empire?'

My study on the spread and circulation of Western opera in East Asia has basically taken two trajectories: one direction considers the theatres in East Asian port cities like Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai, all of which were either British colonial cities or treaty ports from mid nineteenth to early twentieth century; the other considers the opera companies that toured in these cities. Following on the two trajectories, this paper, on the one hand, illustrates the global tour of one company successively led by Giovanni Pompei and Augusto Cagli. Though bearing the name as "Royal Italian Opera Company", it held a global background more than being bound with its Italian operatic metropolis. On the other hand, the paper investigates one theatre, the Shanghai Lyceum Theatre, to figure out who built it, who ran it, and who needed it. It is found that the planning of building the theatre was

implemented by a group of theatrical amateurs, most of them held more than one civic, diplomatic, media or business careers in Shanghai. Therefore, we need to consider again the meaning of operatic business attended by these professional and amateur 'actors': did they just build a theatre, or actually were building the Empire itself?

Flora Willson (King's College London): 'Celebrity migrations: Nellie Melba, *bel canto* and the borders of the operatic canon'

By the late nineteenth century, opera had become fundamentally international: transport and communications networks enabled performers and works to circulate more widely than ever before. Within this self-consciously "modernised" operatic culture, the Italian *bel canto* repertoire occupied a problematic position. A handful of works by Rossini, Donizetti, and Verdi continued to be performed; but they were frequently decried as old-fashioned, the vocal technique they demanded seen as obsolete.

However, the arrival in Europe of Australian soprano Nellie Melba marked a crucial shift. In the early 1890s Melba became not just an operatic star in London and Paris but a mass-media celebrity – one closely associated with three *bel canto* heroines: Lucia, Gilda, and Violetta. What's more, as the singer's own global trajectory continued with her triumphant 1893 debut at the Metropolitan Opera, Melba-fever led to a re-popularisation of *bel canto* even among New York's famously Wagner-loving audiences.

This paper explores the tensions between Melba's status as an explicitly modern media celebrity and the apparently outdated repertoire that she sang. In particular, it asks to what extent Melba's border-crossings – both between nations and between the operatic past and modern life – might have facilitated her role in the 1890s *bel canto* revival. Tracing Melba's reception as a paradigmatic operatic migrant in London, Paris, and New York at the century's end, my paper ultimately seeks to lay the groundwork for a fuller account of the impact of opera's international mobility and celebrity culture on the shifting internal boundaries of the operatic canon.

Alexandra Wilson (Oxford Brookes University): 'Citizens of nowhere? Opera singers and cultural protectionism in 1920s Britain'

Notwithstanding its popularity with audiences and success as a commercial endeavour, opera has always prompted a certain degree of discomfort in Britain because of its status as an imported art-form. In this paper, I shall consider how such rhetoric manifested itself during a single decade, the 1920s, at a moment when foreign singers gradually began to return to Britain after the First World War. During this period, the press exhibited a marked and surprisingly pronounced hostility towards foreign musicians, and singers in particular, although such figures were of course simultaneously the object of widespread fascination. There were several strands to the protectionism debate: singers provoked envy for the high fees that they commanded and disdain (at least from highbrow commentators) for their transgression of aesthetic boundaries in pursuit of star status. The idea that foreign singers were 'coming over and stealing British jobs' – often expressed in crude and overt terms – was not confined to a philistine tabloid press but may be traced in many different types of publication. Indeed, it was a debate that was much alive among British singers themselves.

Yet I shall argue here that a focus on money matters was in reality a smokescreen for a broader range of concerns, about taste, celebrity and identity formation. As we shall see, the debates about cultural protectionism in opera found a counterpart with similar debates about popular music. The resonances with present-day discussions about migration and economic protectionism are sharply pronounced.