

OBERTO – named after Giuseppe Verdi's first opera – is the opera research unit at Oxford Brookes University and provides a forum for the investigation of opera in all of its interdisciplinary richness.

#### STUDY WITH US

At Oxford Brookes University we offer opportunities for the study of opera at all levels, but particularly at master's and doctoral level. Our postgraduate students automatically become members of OBERTO and have the opportunity to attend a wide variety of extra-curricular activities that complement their studies.

#### MASTER'S LEVEL STUDY

The MA in Music at Oxford Brookes allows students to specialise in opera in two ways. Students can either study opera within the context of a broader examination of 19th-century music and its role in society or explore correlations between opera and film music. The course also offers the opportunity to build networks with industry contacts through a professional experience module.

#### PhD LEVEL STUDY

OBERTO staff welcome enquiries from applicants interested in studying for a PhD. Doctoral supervision is available in areas including:

- Opera and operatic culture of the 19th and early 20th centuries
- Verdi, Puccini, Wagner, Strauss
- Music and national identities
- Opera and gender
- Religion and the church on the operatic stage
- Opera and politics
- Opera in popular culture (especially opera in film)
- The staging of opera
- Reception studies, canon formation and opera historiography
- Singers, recordings and constructions of celebrity
- Operatic stereotypes

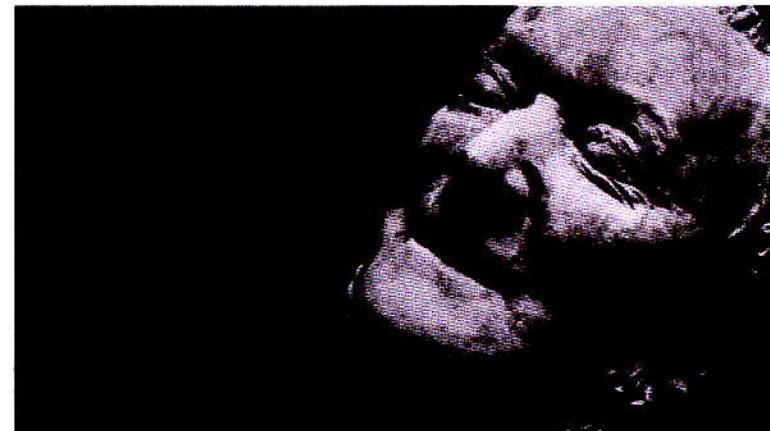
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# OBERTO

Oxford Brookes: Exploring Research Trends in Opera

## THE CANON RELOADED?

## OPERATIC REPERTOIRE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY



Oxford Brookes University, Oxford

Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> September 2019

## Programme of the day

9-9.45 Registration

9.45-10 Welcome

### 10-11 SESSION 1: Foundations (Chair: Alexandra Wilson)

Michael Gibb (Founder of OperaBase): New Opera in the 21st Century – A Guided Tour

Cormac Newark (Guildhall School of Music & Drama): Qualitative vs. Quantitative in *The Oxford Handbook of the Operatic Canon*

### 11-11.30 Tea and coffee

### 11.30-1 SESSION 2: Interventions (Chair: Charlotte Armstrong)

Leo Doulton (director and librettist): Frankenstein's Donster: Reinventing *Don Giovanni* with the Arcola Queer Collective

Andrew Holden (Oxford Brookes University): Don't Mention the 'C' Word - Negotiating and Confronting the Transnational Circulation of Opera

Imani Danielle Mosley (Wichita State University): 'The Positives Outweigh the Negatives': Performing Opera in the Age of Social Justice and Social Media

### 1-2 Lunch

### 2-3.30 SESSION 3: Institutions and Orthodoxies (Chair: Alessandra Palidda)

Adriana Festeu (Royal Academy of Music): Programming Operatic Repertoire for Young Singers

Sid Wolters-Tiedge (Forschungsintitut für Musiktheater, University of Bayreuth): 'Verachtet mir die Meister nicht': Directing the Operatic Canon as Institutional Practice in Germany

Alexandra Wilson (Oxford Brookes University): Dead White Men and the Spectre of Elitism

### 3.30-4 Tea and coffee

### 4-5 Session 4: Marginalia? (Chair: Mahima Macchione)

Jeremy Gray (Bampton Classical Opera): Footnote Operas: Probing the Marginalia of Classical Opera

Alexandra Monchick (California State University, Northridge): Outside the Operatic Canon after #MeToo

### 5pm SESSION 5: Panel and general discussion (Chair: Barbara Eichner)

## Abstracts (in alphabetical order)

### Leo Doulton (director and librettist): *Frankenstein's Donster: Reinventing Don Giovanni with the Arcola Queer Collective*

*Don Giovanni* has been a core part of the operatic canon since it was written. It has been a bawdy comedy, a Romantic heroic fantasy, the progenitor of the 'jeans production', an exemplar of the 'problematic classic', and many other things. Its words and music can sustain many readings, but are usually untouchable.

This paper will explore why, despite a deep love of this masterpiece, I led a production of *Don Giovanni* cut to 1.5 hours, with the music rewritten in disparate modern styles, the characters reinvented and regendered, and some text and music replaced entirely, presented as part of the Grimeborn Festival. This approach was inspired by the spirit rather than the letter of Mozartian performance practice, and desire to resurrect Mozartian audience practices.

Instead of considering community work as a place for specially-written, comparatively easy new operas, this approach shows a way to reinvent the canon as something that is not merely for everyone, but a site for collective practice and radicalism, using the 'problematic' elements as a starting point for discussion and debate. Instead of perfectly preserving a pure, untouched masterpiece - that is to say, a static, dead object - it treats *Don Giovanni* as a living work that shifts and evolves with its times, changing alongside its changing audiences and artists.

Ultimately, this Frankensteinian cutting, splicing, and recreating offers a way to rejuvenate an iconic work, overcoming transnational and transtemporal differences to fit the aesthetic, political, ethical and social desires of the present day.

### Adriana Festeu (Royal Academy of Music): Programming Operatic Repertoire for Young Singers

Conservatoires aim to offer a smooth transition between singers' training and their professional debut. This is usually done through scheduling fully staged operas as one of the main selling points of their programmes. The benefit for students is obvious: they have the opportunity to gain stage experience in a 'safe' environment and try roles prior to entering the audition circuit. The

selection of repertoire aims to reconcile the necessity of programming canonic works alongside new commissions or less performed works. This constitutes a core balancing act of the student experience and the internal agenda of any such institutions.

Having trained in top conservatoires both in Romania and the UK and currently teaching in both countries, I have experienced the results of such programming as a student, as a voice teacher and as a director. As such I was able to observe that the reasoning for programming certain repertoire varies across Europe. For example in Eastern Europe it's mainly to do with the structure of the operatic season in the local opera house, as this constitutes the performance venue. Therefore it is not uncommon to see a student production of *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* or *La Bohème* advertised, with mixed casts of undergraduates and postgraduates. In the UK students are gaining this experience as part of an opera course, having done scenes earlier in their studies.

This calls for a discussion on what constitutes the most useful repertoire for young singers, in the context of the opera industry's overwhelming programming of canonical works.

### Michael Gibb (Founder of OperaBase): New Opera in the 21st Century – A Guided Tour

Since 1996, Operabase has been the most comprehensive source of information on opera activity around the world, providing paid-for services to opera companies and magazines, and free performance listings to the opera-going public in 27 languages.

Annotated annual lists of the world premieres and rarities were complemented by statistical analyses of the operatic activity each season, helping the professional and public alike navigate and understand the context of 25,000 opera performances each year.

In 2019 this database (of 400,000 performances since the year 2000) was augmented and enriched with further data and info from music publishing houses and the Stanford University Opening Nights database, in a move to create a documented global record of new opera in the 21st century.

I will present a very quick global overview of current opera performances in general before turning to new opera and looking at what has remained

constant and what has changed in the world premieres over the last 20 years. There will be some words on the choice of subject matter, and national ideas of culture.

#### **Jeremy Gray (Bampton Opera): Footnote Operas: Probing the Marginalia of Classical Opera**

Through more than 25 years of opera-making, Oxfordshire's Bampton Classical Opera (like Australia's Pinchgut Opera and America's Opera Lafayette) has explored and rejuvenated the periphery of the classical-period canon, performing works ideally suited to a small-scale company. Bampton productions have included (with several UK premières) *Benda Romeo und Julie*, *Bertoni Orfeo*, *Grétry L'amant jaloux*, *Isouard Cendrillon*, *Paer Leonora*, *Portugal Il matrimonio di Figaro*, *Salieri La grotta di Trofonio*, *Falstaff* and *La scuola de' gelosi*, *Storace Gli sposi malcontenti* as well as little-known works by Gluck, Haydn and even Mozart. This paper explains the rationale behind these choices and the responses of audiences and critics.

Whilst some critics have suggested that Bampton 'exhumes' such operas, we consider that musical works continue their lives in silence on library shelves and that they still deserve a voice. The paper will indicate problems and opportunities in mounting forgotten music and suggest that footnote operas provide a refreshing and liberating experience for promoters, performers and audiences, breaking open the restricted opera 'museum'. It will also consider issues of aesthetic quality: since the reputations of many now-neglected composers were once fervently promoted and praised, do they still merit performance and/or recording? It will argue that canonic works such as *Così fan tutte* and *Die Zauberflöte* did not result from some kind of genius virgin birth but evolved through the cross-fertilization of external influences including the operas of others: can we understand the canonic masterpieces of Mozart, Beethoven and Rossini better through experiencing their forerunners and derivatives?

#### **Andrew Holden (Oxford Brookes University): Don't Mention the 'C' Word - Negotiating and Confronting the Transnational Circulation of Opera**

Censorship is intrinsic to the notion of a "canon", but the definition of censorship, in the traditional meaning of restrictions imposed by the legal or administrative organs of the state, requires systematic re-analysis, currently lacking in opera studies or the literature of censorship more broadly. The

transnational circulation of opera has been transformed by multiple political, socio-economic and technological trends, frequently resulting in censorship of content to an extent not seen for decades. Gender norms, sexuality and violence, cultural habits like smoking and tattoos, and the visual representation of naked flesh, are policed in highly individual contexts as opera ecologies expand in regions like the Far East and Middle East.

Performance tradition and power structures in opera are also being breached by more collaborative approaches to production, as well as performer and audience activism, as a growing range of participants have agency in processes which may mimic regulatory control, but in pursuit of diversity and against cultural appropriation, for example ethnocentric operatic tropes such as 'blackface'. Many of these trends encourage risk aversion and self-censorship as opera companies decide what work to programme, whether in co-production or hires.

Focusing on three case studies in circulation – *L'Amour des trois oranges* (Prokofiev), *Maria Stuarda* (Donizetti) and *Aida* (Verdi) – this paper highlights the ways in which opera institutions currently "negotiate" acceptable standards of content, using evidence from interviews with institutional leaders, creative teams and performers, as well assessing the importance of critical and popular reception, and the impact of digital technology.

#### **Alexandra Monchick (California State University, Northridge): Outside the Operatic Canon after #MeToo**

New Musicology has stimulated a reassessment of operas such as *Don Giovanni* and *Rigoletto* for their depictions of violence against women. In the wake of the recent #MeToo movement, the popular press has re-examined the method in which these 'masterworks' are staged and whether they should be produced at all. Scholars too have entered into these debates (Gordon, 2015; Hartford, 2016; Cusick, Hershberger et al, 2018), posing solutions not only about how these works should be staged and taught. Yet, both have chiefly focused on canonical works, thereby assuming universal awareness and cultural importance.

In this paper, I consider how reviving unknown operas with themes that conflict with today's standards of what is socially acceptable is a more precarious task than staging their canonical counterparts. I address how one mediates conflicting duties when uncovering works that were politically suppressed, such as those written during the years of the Weimar Republic and

the Third Reich. While some operatic topics such as murder and rape are universally reprehensible, issues such as underage sex, pederasty, and prostitution are viewed quite differently now as compared to 1920s Berlin. I present a comparative approach focusing on two recent productions: Calixto Bieito's production of Franz Schreker's *Die Gezeichneten* and Richard Brunel's production of Alexander von Zemlinsky's *Der Kreidekreis*. Situating their work within recent Regieoper approaches, I pay particular attention their treatment of stereotypes of disability, race, and gender, as subversion and irony often fall flat with the absence of familiarity.

**Imani Danielle Mosley (Wichita State University): 'The Positives Outweigh the Negatives': Performing Opera in the Age of Social Justice and Social Media**

In 2018, the Hungarian State Opera announced that it would put on four performances of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* in their upcoming season. They held a press conference in which musicologist Zsoldos Dávid stated that staging *Porgy* with an all-black cast per the Gershwin Estate's direction "makes it impossible for this opera to evolve, to start its own life." Criticism toward the company's decision to perform the opera with white Hungarian singers grew as news of the production reached American shores but Hungarian press reacted differently, citing the performance as a reaction against political correctness.

This production was one of several instances in the last few years in which opera has run up against issues of race, diversity, inclusion, and other social issues. Media such as Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter has spread these instances far beyond their immediate reach and has also opened companies up to criticism from online voices in the form of comments, tweets, and blogs. The aim of this paper is two-fold: to discuss how opera companies have engaged with social and political issues in the twenty-first century (*Porgy and Bess*, *Otello*, *Aida*, *The Death of Klinghoffer*) and how fans, critics, and scholars have taken to social media in order to support as well as hold accountable the decisions of companies, composers, and singers in regard to sensitive issues by citing various online forums.

**Cormac Newark (Guildhall School of Music and Drama): Qualitative vs Quantitative in *The Oxford Handbook of the Operatic Canon***

The canon poses questions that are key to opera's past, present and future. Why is the art form apparently so arthritically canonical, with the top ten titles,

all more than a century old, accounting for something like a quarter of all performances world-wide? Why is this top-heavy system of production becoming still more restrictive, even while the repertory is seemingly expanding, notably to include early music? Why did the operatic canon evolve so differently from that of concert music? And why has that evolution attracted so comparatively little attention from scholars? Why, finally, if opera houses all over the world are dutifully honouring their audiences' loyalty to these favorite works, are they having to struggle so hard financially? Answers to these and other problems are offered in a forthcoming collection, *The Oxford Handbook of the Operatic Canon*, by 26 musicologists, historians, and industry professionals working in a wide range of contexts. Topics range from the seventeenth century to the present day, and from Russia to England and continental Europe to the Americas, but this brief presentation will concentrate mainly on one question: how should we measure canonicity?

**Alexandra Wilson (Oxford Brookes University): Dead White Men and the Spectre of Elitism**

A century ago, there was no conception in Britain of opera being 'elitist' in the present-day sense. The press made fun of rich opera-goers at Covent Garden, but opera was also extremely popular among working-class East-Enders and in the industrial cities of the north and there was a genuine sense of opera for all. My current research examines the evolution of British attitudes over the intervening period, investigating how and why we have reached the point where opera is widely regarded as the ultimate elitist art form.

The British conversation about opera and elitism has long focused on the art form's 'trappings': cost, dress codes and grand buildings, as well as nuances of class and national identity. Until recently, however, very few people would have attempted to sustain an argument that the operas themselves are elitist. This paper considers how this has recently begun to change, as opera, like other forms of so-called 'high art', has become caught up in a broader debate about identity politics and social justice. I shall make the case that this approach – and particularly the analogous preoccupation with abandoning canons in the name of 'relevance' – is highly problematic from the perspective of making opera more accessible.

**Sid Wolters-Tledge (Forschungsintitut für Musiktheater, University of Bayreuth): 'Verachtet mir die Meister nicht': Directing the Operatic Canon as Institutional Practice in Germany**

"Director's theatre", "Eurotrash" – the public has found many expressions for an approach to staging opera that has arguably flourished especially in Germany. At the same time, Germany was and is no exception when it comes to perpetuating the canonic repertoire of opera houses. This contribution tries to shed a light on the apparent paradox between innovation and perpetuation that constitutes opera directing until today. What are the relations between opera as an institution, directing opera and the canon?

Taking Germany as a case study, I will argue that the importance of opera directors after 1945 in Germany is attributed to a combination of the German theatres' legally obligated educational duty, the aim to meet the mainstream's taste, and the politicisation of arts after 1968.

With reference to Gérard Genette, I will try to systemise the tools and strategies that directors – and not only those in Germany – have used for dealing with the core repertoire, exemplified in recent productions of Richard Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. Interventions like those shown are generally discussed quite controversially. Interestingly enough, both advocates of the director's conceptual dominance and their counterparts, preaching faithfulness to the permanent essence of an opera, might be seen as sharing a quasi-religious belief in the omnipotence of the canon's operatic texts, thus perpetuating the limitations of canon. This might give a possible explanation for the ambivalent role of innovative staging practices when it comes to breaking up the canon.