‘AN EXCLUSIVE AND EXPENSIVE ARTICLE?’

OPERA AND MONEY

Oxford Brookes University

Headington Hill Hall

Tuesday 12 September 2023

Programme of the Day

9-9.45 Registration

9.45-10 Welcome

10-11.30 SESSION 1a: (Chair: Nick Phillips)

Riccardo Mandelli (Leipzig University): 'Capitalising the Empire: La Fenice's Carnival Season 1850/51'

Alice Lee (Stonybrook University): 'Auditing the Opera: A Financial and Quantitative-Based Analysis of the Wiener Hofoper in the Mid-Nineteenth Century'

Andrew Holden (Oxford Brookes University): 'Opera and philanthropy in late nineteenth century Italy – a case study of the wool town of Schio'

10-11.30 Session 1b: (Chair: Ditlev Rindom)

Inka-Maria Nyman (Åbo Akademi University, Turku): 'Neoliberal opera? Money and cultural value in contemporary opera practices'

Rebecca Lowe: 'A rights-based answer to the question of opera's opportunity cost'

Jessica Leary (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland): 'Reaching out in opera: Exploring the notions of "funding", "access", "inclusivity", "identity" and "status" from the perspective of singers working in opera outreach'

11.30-12 Tea and coffee

12-1 SESSION 2: (Chair: Alessandro Talevi)

Mathieu Duplay (Université Paris Cité): '"My Business is Philosophy": Money and the Power of Indeterminacy in *Nixon in China* by John Adams and Alice Goodman'

Sarah Lenton (freelance opera writer): '*Quanto*?'

1-2 Lunch

2-3 SESSION 3: (Chair: Alessandra Palidda)

Clair Rowden (Cardiff University): 'Prized, pawned, paste, passed on: a singer's jewellery'

Alexandra Wilson (Oxford Brookes University): '"The Right Thing in the Wrong Way and at the Wrong Time": The Great British Opera Subsidy Row of 1930-31'

3-3.30 Tea and coffee

3.30-4.30 Session 4: (Chair: Emma Kavanagh)

Marina Jones (English National Opera): '"I should like to die in the auditorium" – why and who leaves money to opera?'

Matthew Rooke (St Andrews University): 'Who actually pays the piper?'

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

With: Michael Volpe (If Opera), Mimi Doulton (Freelancers Make Theatre Work), David Ward (Northern Opera Group), Guy Withers (Waterperry Opera)

Abstracts (in alphabetical order)

Matthieu Duplay (Université Paris Cité), '"My Business is Philosophy": Money and the Power of Indeterminacy in *Nixon in China* by John Adams and Alice Goodman'

The question of money, its uses, and its social and political impact is surprisingly absent from John Adams's *Nixon in China* (1987, libretto by Alice Goodman). Based on Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to Beijing, the entire opera hinges on the tense confrontation between two competing systems, as a Republican president attempts to form an unlikely alliance with Mao Tse-tung, the leader of Communist China. Nevertheless, economic issues are hardly ever discussed while ethical and existential issues consistently come to the fore, suggesting that community, rather than trade or the wealth of nations, is the real issue here. However, a closer look at the libretto shows that the language of money – referred to jokingly, or treated as a repository of convenient metaphors – is used throughout the opera with remarkable persistence. "My business is philosophy," Chairman Mao ambiguously tells his American visitors as if to imply that philosophy, too, is a "business," a money-making enterprise. "The current trend/ Suggests that China's future might –" Chou En-lai teasingly begins; Nixon completes the sentence: "Might break the futures market," a possibility that Mao is curiously eager to contemplate (I.2). The point is not so much to suggest that the differences between the two systems are less pronounced than would appear at first sight, as it is to question the oppositions – between China and America, Communism and capitalism, ethics and economics, or the material and the spiritual – on which the entire plot appears to rest. Throughout, money functions as a corrosive, ironic force, a circulating energy (and a source of circulating metaphors) that undermines all seemingly stable identities and, in a world divided by "an ocean of distrust," testifies to the power of indeterminacy.

Andrew Holden (Oxford Brookes University): 'Opera and philanthropy in late nineteenth century Italy – a case study of the wool town of Schio'

Schio's historical significance derives from its role as the home of the family wool-making business expanded by Alessandro Rossi in the first years after the Veneto's absorption into the new Kingdom of Italy in 1866. Rossi's version of the European paternalist industrial model saw the construction of the *nuovo*

quartiere operaio comprising social programmes of education, health and recreation while preserving social hierarchies and opposing socialist organisation or greater equality for women. Immediately behind the factory Rossi erected a complex comprising a fantastical ornamental garden, flanked by an imposing building containing a library and theatre. Here Rossi and his supporters experimented with creating a theatre suitable for his workers including prose and melodrama, and often depicting the lives of working people.

Notably, he commissioned a local dialect version of Vittorio Bersezio's piedmontese play, *Le Miserie di Monssù Travet*, in which the wife of the pen-pushing eponymous hero forces her husband to pawn his precious pocket watch to fund a costume worthy of a night at the opera at Torino's Teatro Regio as guests of Travet's employer. Later in 1909 Rossi's grandson funded the construction of a new horseshoe theatre where the inaugural production of Boito's *Mefistofele* was praised in the review *Ars e Labor* for its grandeur, sophisticated architecture and decoration. This paper examines through archival sources how opera was represented in the activities of the *nuovo quartiere operaio*, how they evolved in the half century between the construction of these two theatres, and considers what inferences we might make about the utility of opera as an art form within the economic and social relations of this model worker community.

Marina Jones (English National Opera): '"I should like to die in the auditorium" – why and who leaves money to opera?'

In *Gianni Schicchi* Buoso Donati's relatives are horrified to discover that he has bequeathed his fortune to the monastery - but who leaves money to an opera house in their will? And why?

Using research based on oral histories from legacy pledgers to the Royal Opera House this talk will explore why opera means so much to people that they leave money to it in their will. Legacy giving is becoming an increasingly important aspect of the fundraising mix as opera companies seek to diversify and increase earned and fundraised income. £5.5 trillion is due to be transferred between generations over forthcoming decades in the UK alone. Arts and cultural charities are seeing an increase of gifts in wills, and gifts to arts charities are larger than the UK average gift.

This research explores the strength of the connection, the development of shared identities, identity fusion, how gifts in wills help create a sense of meaning and autobiography for donors through the choice of gift. It draws on the importance of first visits, peak memorable experiences, excellence and nostalgia as a social emotion that connects people to what they love.

Jessica Leary (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland): 'Reaching out in opera: Exploring the notions of "funding", "access", "inclusivity", "identity" and "status" from the perspective of singers working in opera outreach'

In recent years, opera outreach work in the UK has taken on new impetus, not least as a means of justifying the relevance of opera within an evolving cultural and political climate. The accusation that opera is financially and culturally elitist has been hotly challenged from within the industry, with audience impact data and case-studies of singers from working class backgrounds regularly cited as evidence that opera is both 'accessible' and 'inclusive'. Nonetheless, the experiences of singers who regularly work in outreach contexts have largely been overlooked in this debate.

This paper addresses this problem by specifically considering the perspective of singers working in outreach contexts. It explores how the notions of 'funding', 'access', 'inclusivity', 'identity' and 'status' play out in the relationship between mainstage and outreach and asserts the following: i. that singers who derive most of their income from outreach projects (as opposed to performance) experience a tension in identity and status; ii. that, despite the purported importance of outreach for audience development and cultural impact, there is a perceived imbalance between the funding of outreach versus mainstage projects. This paper suggests that a financial and structural disconnect between mainstage and outreach activity contributes to a sense of elitism from both the practitioner and audience perspective and potentially undermines the integrity of outreach programmes. This paper draws upon qualitative interview data (12 professional singers) gathered between 2020-2022 and relates to a broader investigation into opera outreach. It raises questions about the place of opera outreach in industry practice.

Alice Lee (Stonybrook University): 'Auditing the Opera: A Financial and Quantitative-Based Analysis of the Wiener *Hofoper* in the Mid-Nineteenth Century'

There is no doubt that opera has historically been one of the most multidisciplinary and capital-intensive art forms in Western classical music. In spite of financial deficits, it has survived by way of outside influences – especially in nineteenth-century Vienna, artistic expression and cultural prestige were with a goal of further perpetuating an imperial identity.

Nevertheless, scrutinizing the wherewithals of the *Hofoper* may provide additional understanding when exploring this societal occurrence. Although the social value of a cultural institution cannot exclusively be determined by financial capital, it would be remiss to ignore its role in the different factions that ultimately make up a musical institution. In particular, the collection and analysis of historical financial and quantitative data arguably has not been as prioritized. Such a constellation is precisely where my paper is positioned.

By way of historical archival data, my paper will mainly analyze and discuss revenue and expenditure streams of the Wiener *Hofoper* throughout glimpses in the mid-nineteenth century. By recreating a historically fiscal picture of the institution, it intends to reconsider the position of data analysis within musicology and the importance in strengthening the connection between financial systems and opera as a monetarily-driven institution. At the same time, it will keep in sight factors such as cultural and political intentions. Accordingly, I will conclude my paper by taking a step back from the numbers and considering implications on a more social and aesthetic level.

Sarah Lenton (freelance opera writer): '*Quanto*?'

'Quanto' is Tosca asking the price for Cavaradossi's release. And 'how much?' is something that's often heard in the opera business, at the Box Office, the Stalls Bar, as the season is being planned and so on. But not curiously enough on stage.

There are surprisingly few specific calls for prop money on stage (possibly reflecting the scarcity of actual money in cash-hungry Italy). Violetta has a pile of notes flung at her in Act 3, there's a chink of coins in Barber, and Figaro pockets wads of ready cash in *Nozze* Act 3. Actual money sometimes appeared

on stage - in more rough and ready times – to be given on the spot to extras. But money is more often concealed in a casually thrown purse, a stack of gaming chips, or invisibly present as the major preoccupation of a protagonist: Manon's fear of destitution for example, and the manic drive of Peter Grimes or Hermann in *Queen of Spades*. Even so, it isn't usually the stuff of serious opera and whole shows sweep past without money being mentioned at all: we never learn what the aristocrats in Handel or Verdi exist on as they thunder through, obsessed with dynastic ambition, honour, or *la patria*. Comic opera on the other hand is awash with it – desperately needed to get you out of the army, or for a dowry or a bribe. The middle classes know the value of money, as do the Bohemians, Madam Butterfly and Violetta's pitiful 'venti luigi…'

Rebecca Lowe: 'A rights-based answer to the question of opera's opportunity cost'

Opera is undeniably expensive, relative not only to other art forms, but also other costly things important to a good life. Nonetheless, in this paper, I will set out what aims to be a sufficient justification (amongst many possible such justifications) for its general taxpayer subsidy. I will argue that whilst parents hold the primary obligation to ensure their children have access to opera, this should be substantially supported by the state, in all but the most economically-constrained conditions.

I will begin by making a case that opera is a universal cultural good. Here, I will loosely define 'universal cultural good' as the product or focus of a domain of human aesthetic excellence, the personal and social value of which transcends place and time, reflecting a central cultural achievement of humanity. I will then address the underlying politico-philosophical question of when — i.e. in which political and economic conditions — access to universal cultural goods should be considered a matter of 'general' moral rights. I will argue that, minimally, all children have the equal moral right to access (at least some) universal cultural goods. But that in any political society with a developed economy, children's broad access to such goods should be ensured by the state, on top of forming a key part of a child's upbringing as overseen by family and community. Finally, I will aim to pin down more clearly the content of the rights-correlative obligations involved.

Riccardo Mandelli (Leipzig University): 'Capitalising the Empire: La Fenice's Carnival Season 1850/51'

Fire, expensive restoration works, debts, late payers, unreliable impresarios – these were just some of the many challenges that the Teatro La Fenice faced during the first half of the nineteenth century. Although money was often running short, this fact did non inhibit local authorities and artistic directors from 'thinking big' when it came to conceiving the forthcoming season's playbills. This is especially clear when looking at La Fenice's 1850/51 Carnival season, which featured internationally renowned interpreters as the ballet dancer Augusta Maywood, as well as important premières such as *Rigoletto* by Giuseppe Verdi.

A wide range of documents held at the Venice State Archive – correspondence, reports, bills, requests – reinforce the sense of time and financial constraints that the theatre was experiencing in the spring of 1850. More importantly, I argue, such hitherto unexplored archival material provides an insight into the multi-layered funding system of La Fenice – one that was based on an interplay between local administrators, authorities representing the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia, and the Empire's Ministry of Interior in Vienna.

By looking at how economic capital was managed among different actors in the mid-century theatrical business, my paper eventually illustrates how Venice's 'operatic capital' was at the core of the Habsburgs' cultural and political agenda.

Inka-Maria Nyman (Åbo Akademi University, Turku): 'Neoliberal opera? Money and cultural value in contemporary opera practices'

This paper focuses on the cultural meaning of opera and examines the relationship between opera and money in contemporary society, where ideas about opera are affected by trends such as digitalization, mediatisation, and consumer culture. While opera in the public debates is depicted as expensive and extravagant, state funding for opera is justified through ideas of national cultural heritage and democratic access. At the same time, opera producers develop marketing strategies for online social media services in order to broaden and diversify participation, fighting perceptions of opera as elitist. Thus, essentially, in the neoliberal age, opera producers and audiences alike face the question 'What is it worth?', hence seeking answers that reach

beyond the most apparent issues of money and instead renegotiate cultural value.

Presenting three sub-studies that examine how meaning is created for opera, the paper sheds light on topical issues of access, institutional funding, and digital media culture. Perceptions of opera are studied in the public debates in print media, among opera producers in a language minority context, and on the social media service Instagram. The results reveal conflicting discursive understandings of opera and failing access schemes, implying that opera in the neoliberal age is, truly, just a question of money – but that question is about drawing and redrawing boundaries between art and entertainment, the 'high' and the 'common', and to ask who can define cultural value.

Matthew Rooke (St Andrews University): 'Who actually pays the piper?'

The state, in the form of National Portfolio funding granted via Arts Council England, is the largest single source of investment in opera in England. It's charter object is to: 'develop and improve the knowledge, understanding and practice of the arts'.

The paper will focus upon an analysis of the knowledge and understanding of the practice of opera of the two Arts Council committees which took the decisions which resulted in the significant cuts in funding to the ENO and other opera providers. This analysis does not name or discuss specific, identifiable individuals. Rather it takes the biographies of the Arts Council National and London committees which are published on its website and then subjects each to analysis using as its frame of reference the extent to which they are involved in opera, divided into the following categories:

- Category 1: those with direct expertise in the primary production of opera, primary production being as a singer, instrumentalist, conductor or composer
- Category 2: those whose work cannot take place without the combined efforts of those in category 1, but who realise the production of opera on stage. This category includes directors, technicians, choreographers, designers.
- Category 3: these are those who do not deliver category 1 & 2 functions but whose expertise enables the public performance and presentation to

take place. These are functions like administration, box office, front of house marketing, outreach and education and fundraising .
- Category 4: these are people who are not involved in 1,2 & 3 above but who are involved in some other aspect of the wider classical music scene.
- Category 5: are those involved in some other aspect of the music sector beyond classical music.
- Category 6: are those whose primary expertise is not involved in music any way but is involved in other performing arts.
- Category 7: are those who are not involved in the performing arts but in some other art form area.
- Category 8: are those whose primary expertise is not in any specific art form but in wider social, educational or political or economic development spheres.

Looked at as if it were like an archery target, those with direct expertise in opera would score a "bulls eye", whereas others would be found further out to the edges in varying degrees. These categories are then analysed to identify the extent to which the object to develop and improve the knowledge, understanding and practice of the arts in the conduct of the Arts Council's decision making process was informed by actual knowledge and understanding of the practice of opera as an art form, converting the categories into a percentage of the total decision makers involved. (E.g. of the X decision makers involved, Y % had any direct experience of creating opera, etc.)

This will then be followed by a discussion with regards to whether the degree of knowledge and experience which informed this decision might be considered appropriate in relation to delivering the Arts Council's objects and whether the resulting decisions might be deemed securely grounded or not.

Clair Rowden (Cardiff University): 'Prized, pawned, paste, passed on: a singer's jewellery'

During the nineteenth century, female opera singers who travelled the globe received jewellery in recognition of their talents, either as a private gift from a monarch or as a very public bestowing of favour from operatic audiences and subscribers. Jewels served simultaneously as unofficial part payment and as symbolic capital, conferring not merely financial wealth but also power and status. Rather than focusing on the wearing of the jewellery and its varied representations of the feminine self, this paper looks at how jewellery was a

proxy for its monetary value: how it was kept safe, pawned for liquidity, or bequeathed to create hereditary artistic and financial wealth.

The flipside of the ornament and spectacle of jewellery is, of course, the secretive and symbolic confinement represented by the jewel box in which jewels were kept safe. Jewels have a long history of serving as an international currency, and in countries where married women could not own property in their own right, the acquisition of jewels was one currency not denied to them. In those situations, jewels could become a singer's only material assets (besides their voices and training), and their sale or pawning was a common, ordinary and often repeated gesture. Not all jewels were new, and some were bequeathed from singer to singer, creating an operatic aristocracy of inherited worth and value. The dissimulation of real gems with paste substitutions – also a common practice – and its consequences also invites interrogation of the questions of value, both financial and social, posed throughout the paper. All these issues crystallise around the phenomenal figure of Adelina Patti: her roles, her jewels, her bequests and her paste.

Alexandra Wilson (Oxford Brookes University): '"The Right Thing in the Wrong Way and at the Wrong Time": The Great British Opera Subsidy Row of 1930-31'

In 1930, Philip Snowden, Chancellor of the Exchequer in Ramsay MacDonald's Labour government, did an audacious thing in proposing to pay for opera using public money. The first British opera subsidy scheme was the culmination of years of discussion about how the art form ought to be funded. It was, on the face of it, a worthy plan, intended to take opera to a wider audience, but it could scarcely have come at a worse time, at the height of the Depression. A row ensued about suitable uses of taxpayers' money and the extent to which the British were willing to take an interest in – and pay for – art forms that were not 'home-grown'.

This paper considers the rhetoric of the subsidy debate: voices for and against the subsidy among politicians, journalists, members of the public, and figures from the opera world itself; objections to the scheme that were variously economic, social, and nationalistic; and discussions about the 'right' and 'wrong' types of opera to fund.