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Introduction to Special Issue on Opera Reception

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Traditional approaches to studying the reception of opera (both as a genre and with regard to individual works) have revealed, and continue to reveal, a great deal about ways in which opera means and ways in which it has been or might be made to mean something different. In the past these valuable studies often focused on music criticism, in particular on the public, critical debates that played out in journalistic commentary around the time of an opera's premiere. The existing scholarship is exceedingly rich in the ways it has helped us to understand the context and the historical trajectories of operatic works. (Many of the contributors to the present issue have made significant contributions in this regard.)

In recent years, scholars have opened their studies to an even broader array of resources. Taking into consideration a variety of materials, media and audiences not routinely investigated earlier,[1] they have begun probing into hitherto neglected ways in which opera made its way in the world, including the role of parody, caricature, parlour songs, burlesque, film, fictional depictions in literature, and revisionist stagings, among other topics. New models for evaluating the significance and meanings of operas as artistic, cultural, social and even political and economic objects have begun to emerge; evidence of some of these models, as well as of some new ones, can be found in the articles here. With the evolving technology of the twenty-first century come new modes of accessing operatic performances, new possibilities for staging productions of operatic works and new means for communicating about those works and/or their performances; these ever-changing experiences and activities seem to demand continuing flexibility, resourcefulness and inventiveness in the study of opera reception.

This issue of *Cambridge Opera Journal* adds to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to understand more broadly and more deeply the reception histories of operatic works. The complexes of infinitely changing variables in what an operatic work comprises and how an operatic work is presented and perceived make the genre of opera an especially appropriate one for the types of expanded concepts of 'reception' reflected here. The authors of these five articles adopt diverse approaches and apply them to varied topics pertaining to the perception, interpretation, adaptation, presentation and appropriation of opera to illustrate some of the ways in which the parameters of opera reception studies are expanding. It is especially important to embark in earnest on such approaches at this time, for the

[1] For some thought-provoking reflections on the topic, see Jann Pasler's 'Introduction' in her *Writing through Music: Essays on Music, Culture, and Politics* (Oxford and New York, 2008).

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social position and the cultural role of opera, as well as the manner of studying all aspects of the operatic arts, have evolved, and continue to evolve. As new methods for conducting research about opera take hold, the 'standard' models for studying reception are not to be abandoned, but they might be further enhanced by different ways of thinking about and interrogating traditional sources and through the development and application of exceptional critical methodologies.

The studies included here aim to encourage precisely this kind of expanded study, as well as to begin identifying issues and questions that cut across geographical, temporal and disciplinary boundaries. They also address interactions between what is traditionally considered *Wirkung* and *Rezeption*, bringing the two concepts closer together in their approaches to the topic.[2] The topics range from a consideration of press previews to studies of caricature and comic strips, and from a discussion of updated stagings to one of paratexts for video productions of opera. Each article takes a specific work or composer as a case study – Wagner, Massenet, Gounod, Verdi, Puccini – but the questions posed, the methods employed and the conclusions drawn can be applied broadly to the operatic repertory.

In the opening article, Katharine Ellis reverses the direction of historians' traditional centralist story of Wagner in Paris. She does so in light of the seven French regional towns that staged *Lohengrin* on publicly funded stages in 1891, before the capital's directors of the Opéra dared to follow suit. Because, in the regions, the opera's 'job' was effectively to prove to Paris that Wagner stagings and rioting need not go hand in hand, Ellis focuses more on press previews than on the usual post-performance writings. In addition, she foregrounds the role of archival research, which adds a layer to the press conversation (one that is frequently overlooked), and which in this case puts in perspective some of the societal aspects of the opera stagings that critics did not explore. Ellis thus integrates reception study into cultural history rather than treating it as an approach in and of itself, while shedding light on our understanding of the foundations of the reception of the works of one of opera history's most noted composers.

Remaining in nineteenth-century France, Clair Rowden addresses the 'visibility' of native composer Jules Massenet at the height of his career through the lens of the French press, but a segment not frequently studied – the caricatural press. Focusing on opera in cartoon parody format, which was featured in several nineteenth-century journals, she discusses how, through a shared set of codes, these visual parodies communicated irony and satire about opera and more. Rowden argues that these cartoon parodies constituted an authorised, temporary subversion of recognisable forms that inscribed the mocked conventions onto themselves, thus guaranteeing their continued existence; she continues by making the case that these parodies presented a consensual view of the artistic establishment and reinforced dominant aesthetic and moral mores. Highlighting the commemorative function of the caricatures of Massenet and of his operas, Rowden

[2] For a concise commentary on the issues involved in music reception studies in this regard, see Mark Everist, 'Reception Theories, Canonic Discourse and Musical Value', in *Rethinking Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford, 1999), 378–402. See also Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London, 1984), esp. 53–146.

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demonstrates how the operas and the visual artefacts reinforce one another's significance for audiences, both those who would have had and those who would not have had first-hand experience of the works in the opera house.

Cormac Newark discusses one of the most widely performed operas of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Charles Gounod's *Faust*, through a reading of Hergé's (Georges Remi) long-running *bande dessinée Les Aventures de Tintin*. Hergé's contribution to opera reception studies lies in his creation of a beloved fictional soprano, Bianca Castafiore, a recurring character in the comic strip for four decades. The singer's repertory appears to contain a single aria, the 'Jewel Song' from *Faust*. Discussing Castafiore as Hergé's symbol for the ossification and homogeneity of the opera repertory worldwide, Newark argues that these comic strips present a case study in 'nested reception', a term referring to the phenomenon in which cultural artefacts, especially those in popular forms, beyond generating their own reception both contain and propagate that of others. Newark discusses how and what such artefacts tell us about the penetration of opera into culture, the ways in which they give a sense of what opera and its paraphernalia can become over time, and how they may even have had an impact on an opera's histories.

Shifting the focus from reflections on and appropriations of operas to operatic works in performance, Alexandra Wilson focuses on Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*, a comic opera set in the thirteenth century, and its repeated updated stagings since the turn of the twenty-first century in British and American productions. She considers what the consistent shifting of the opera's setting to the twentieth century, particularly to the 1950s–1960s, and the implied intertextual references to other cultural artefacts of that era, may tell us about Puccini reception and about the ways in which opera intersects with popular culture to articulate, disseminate and romanticise notions of historical time to audiences. Wilson argues that such productions forge alternative histories for *Gianni Schicchi*, thereby defining and shaping the opera anew for present and future audiences.[3]

In the final article of the collection, Carlo Cenciarelli focuses on the paratexts of opera videos as a route into the complex relationship between opera and modern-day visual culture. Exploring the tension between two aesthetic and cultural paradigms that can be labelled 'televisual' and 'cinematic', he makes a case for the ancillary materials surrounding opera videos as alternative modes of visual mediation. Focusing on productions of Verdi's *Don Carlos/Don Carlo* between 1983 and 2010, he demonstrates how these visible (and audible) traces of a cinematic discourse frame the videoed operatic performance, and how, in doing so, they blur the separation between medium and content upheld by the paradigm of the televisual. He further examines how these paratexts become a means of exploring the contested nature of opera videos, their contrasting claims with regard to televisual immediacy and cinematic 'hyper-mediacy', and the broader

[3] On the 'alternative histories' that such stagings create, see Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, 2001).

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implications of these claims for our understanding of the ontology of the work and its performance.

These essays emphasise both obvious and less obvious concerns in operatic reception, alighting on diverse discourses, drawing on various resources, making use of varied approaches/methodologies and taking into account differing extra-musical contexts. They add chapters to familiar stories or introduce altogether new stories; their contributions may begin to modify existing histories for specific works but perhaps, of greater importance, for the genre of opera as a whole. This small, though varied, selection of writings seeks not only to inform but also to open up fruitful paths for studying – and understanding – the complexities of opera and those who experience it. In doing so, these articles highlight the vitality and diversity of current scholarship on opera reception and point to challenges for future study.

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