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FROM THE SPECIAL EDITOR

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There is arguably no better place to showcase the grudges and pleasures of shared labor than the field of opera. Western opera, one of the most inclusive forms of theatre, emerged toward the end of the sixteenth century as the result of a philological experiment, an intentional exchange among artists and scholars. The meetings of the Camerata Fiorentina motivated the creation of an indigenous Italian practice that gradually became a European business. Through opera, Naples and Venice colonized Paris, Vienna, and London. Handel—a Germanic composer in the Italian style that successfully entertained British audiences—encapsulated its translocal influence during the baroque. Giuseppe Verdi, Richard Wagner, Modest Mussorgsky, and Leoš Janáček (among others) turned it into the incarnation of a national ethos. Opera is visceral, hyperbolic, and extremely expensive, and its ability to activate aesthetic or political debates has certainly decreased since World War II. But its impact in our cultural imaginary is still nothing less than vigorous. Even Francis Bacon's recycling of Velázquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X profits from an operatic understanding of the open mouth, the gates of teeth that enable transitions from heartbeat to pneuma, from matter to sound, from physical effect to emotional affect. Shakespeare has his Wooden O, but the O of Western opera is made of muscle, flesh, and breathing—and it certainly takes a village to produce it.

This issue of *Theatre Survey* conceptualizes opera as an intersectional ground, a cultural node that brings to the surface ideological compromises that tend to remain occluded or latent in recent discussions of theatricality. On the one hand, in spite of contemporary tendencies to theorize performance without or beyond the dramatic text, opera is still tenaciously attached to words and script. On the other hand, few staging practices have been so relentlessly and ostensively nonnaturalistic. Opera always fails the test of verisimilitude: it wears its artificiality too loudly. "The more absurd it appears, the more this proves its authenticity," claims Mladen Dolar. "Whereas anthropologists have to travel to the primeval forests of South America and to the islands of the Pacific to find relics of ancient social rituals, we merely need to go to the opera. . . . The moment we enter the opera, we start acting as our own aboriginal population."[1] Opera provides an ethnography of our cultural Ego.

According to Gary Tomlinson, "Operatic singing has supplied for the elite societies of early modern and modern Europe a potent experience of a

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metaphysics as well as of a physics, of an immaterial as well as of a material world."[2] Opera works at its best when the engaged eye submits to the enchantments of the engaged ear, when spectators abandon themselves to their role as audiences, when the visible enhances the invisible. My personal experience of opera—as a theatergoer, a voracious listener of recordings, and an incidental tenor—leads me to believe that operatic music intensifies my awareness of selfhood (my sense of *being*) over my awareness of pronouns (my sense of *identity*). In the end, this might only mean that I have read too much Schopenhauer, but a fundamental issue remains. What kind of documentation can account for the hallucinatory power of sound, the capacity for something ethereal to inflect our evaluation of the material? If opera amplifies the rift between tangibility and fantasy, what type of archive can contain both its concrete and psychological sedimentations?

As a tentative response to this conundrum, the reader will find here a historiography of operatic negotiations. Carolyn Abbate argues that opera enables an interaction "between performers and a master voice," a gathering of diverse skills and physical energies that embodies the force of music.[3] As all our contributors demonstrate, who is the performer and who is the master is not always as clear as we might think. The essays included in this issue explore the collaborative process that articulates operatic productions from the perspectives of film, literature, and gender. We prefer to emphasize what I would like to call the *embedded communities* of opera: directors, writers, and singers, people that in the historiography of the genre are usually subsumed under the controlling presence of the composer. By spotlighting the dramaturgical, conceptual, and somatic choices involved in producing opera, each piece enhances our understanding of how opera channels the libidinal investments that activate it.

We decided that blowing up the opera houses—as Pierre Boulez once demanded—is less interesting that investigating them. In "Marketing the Voice: Opera, Film, and the Case of Robert Altman," Gayle Magee maps the financial and aesthetic entanglements that enabled the late American director to transfer his experience behind the camera into a highly experimental recasting of the narrative capabilities of opera. Using techniques commonly associated with literature and cinema (flashbacks, overlapping actions, improvised blocking), Robert Altman not only reinterpreted canonical works—such as Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*—but also participated in the creation of new operatic pieces in collaboration with composer William Bolcom.

Minou Arjomand's "E. M. Forster's *Billy Budd* and the Collaborative World of Opera" reminds us that the gestation of an operatic libretto is a theatrical act in its own right. Forster's attachment to Wagnerian ideas about death and redemption inflect both his reading of the homoerotic clues present in Melville's novella and the overall structuring of Britten's score. Arjomand calls attention to the fact that musical drama is by definition a multienacted object. The production of its textual template was, to a certain extent, the first performance of *Billy Budd*.

Last but not least, Claudia Rene Wier's "A Nest of Nightingales: Cuzzoni and Senesino at Handel's Royal Academy of Music" takes us back to the realms

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of baroque opera. Her exploration of Francesca Cuzzoni's career in London provides an account of how Handel navigated the boundaries between castrati and female singers in reaction to the emergence of increasingly polarized gender categories. Wier discloses how Cuzzoni and Handel together confronted an audience that was gradually becoming impatient with the implicit tension between body and sound deployed by castrati performers such as Senesino.

Altman and Bolcom reconfigure opera and the mechanisms of its publicity through the lens of movies. Forster, Crozier, and Britten force us to revisit the proverbial debate between words and music that has marked the history of opera from Gluck's reforms in the eighteenth century to the final scene of Richard Strauss's *Capriccio*. Cuzzoni, Senesino, and Handel slowly recognized the need to respond to shifts in the formation of gender discourses. In each of these instances a degree of interdisciplinary elasticity has been required in order to capture more effectively the conflicted links among subjects, institutions, and axiologies that make opera possible. While every article reimagines the history of opera from a different point of view, they all share a fundamental interest in unpacking the way opera facilitates a dialogue among personal desires, economic imperatives, and communal expectations. Anyone who listens to Mozart's, Berlioz's, or John Adams's operas knows that musical drama manages to underline the nuances of specific relational moments while making us extremely cognizant of the perambulations of time. In this sense, the task of the theatre historian is not that different from the task of the operatic composer.

For "Critical Stages," Patrick Anderson orchestrates a conversation between Daphne Lei and Mary Zimmerman. Lei is an expert on Chinese opera, and Zimmerman has recently directed three productions at the Metropolitan Opera House: Donizetti's *Lucia di Lamermoor* (2007–8), Bellini's *La sonnambula* (2008–9), and Rossini's *Armida* (2009–10). Lei and Zimmerman's counterpoint shows that, just as scholarship and artistic invention were close partners at the beginnings of Western opera, we should also expect that friendship to flourish even more during our own global century.

Wayne Koestenbaum says that "Opera can change nothing in real life, but it alters our fantasies."[4] It can also influence our reading and collecting habits. For this installment of our "*Re:* Sources" section, Nena Couch introduces us to the Francis Robinson Collection of Theatre, Music, and Dance at Vanderbilt University. From 1948 to 1980, as organizer of the annual tours sponsored by the Metropolitan Opera House, Francis Robinson was at the center of an artistic campaign that aspired to integrate opera into the national landscape of the United States. His collection is a testimony to the impact managers, press agents, and journalists made on the cultural pulse of our theatrical life. For "What Are You Reading?" editor Katherine Scheil invites Judith Milhous—one of the most distinguished scholars of opera today—to share with us some of the curricular challenges confronted by her in the operatic classroom.

This issue of *Theatre Survey* announces the end of Nena Couch's tenure as editor of our "*Re:* Sources" section. We thank Couch for her magnificent contributions to our journal. We also welcome Beth Kattelman as our new "*Re:* Sources" editor. Kattelman has a Ph.D. in Theatre from Ohio State University.

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She is an elected trustee with the Theatre Library Association and the Society of Ohio Archivists, and she has served as an editor for both *Theatre Studies* and the Society of Ohio Archivists newsletter. Her first commission will appear in 2011.

Finally, this special issue would have not been possible without the tenacious support of Kate Babbitt and Catherine Cole.

ENDNOTES

1. Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, *Opera's Second Death* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 4.
2. Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 4.
3. Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 18.
4. Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993), 176–7.

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