the changing profession

Interdisciplinary Opera Studies

LINDA HUTCHEON

Multimedia Meets Interdisciplinarity

I HOLD THIS TRUTH TO BE SELF-EVIDENT: THAT AN ART FORM CONSISTING OF A LITERARY TEXT, A DRAMATIC STAGE PERFORMANCE, AND MUSIC should be studied in all its multimedia and "multimediated" dimensions (Kramer, *Opera* 25). Today I can make this statement with confidence because the academic study of opera indeed covers all those aesthetic bases, but that has not always been the case. So long as opera fell primarily within the domain of musicology, it was studied first and foremost as music alone. The fact that the music was written for a specific dramatic text was not deemed particularly significant. The very name given to that text betrayed a belief in its secondariness: the diminutive *libretto*. But things have been changing: in recent years, some musicologists have challenged the dominant positivistic historicism and formalism of their discipline; some have even looked to literary theory for inspiration, bringing new approaches to the music of opera through narratology (e.g., Abbate) or semiotics (e.g., Nattiez). But just as important for opening up the study of opera as an aesthetic and cultural form has been the attention of scholars working in other disciplines. To take but one example, Peter Rabinowitz's rhetorical narrative theory introduced new ways of thinking about opera as narrative, not only as drama and, more pointedly, not only as drama with the *composer* in the role of dramatist (Kerman). It was opera, not dance, for example, that became a focus for interdisciplinary studies; already multimediated, it attracted diverse lines of inquiry. To cite the title of David Levin's groundbreaking 1994 volume, we can now see "opera through other eyes." (Musical theater too has been seen through other—especially literary—eyes, but that is not the focus of this piece [see, e.g., Most; Miller; Rabinowitz].)

Theodor Adorno opened the floodgates for the interdisciplinarily inclined early on. The only Frankfurt school theorist to take music as his primary ground for theorizing, Adorno wrote at length, for instance, on the aesthetics and ideology of Richard Wagner's op-

LINDA HUTCHEON is University Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto. Her most recent books include *A Theory of Adaptation* (Routledge, 2006) and, in collaboration with Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: The Art of Dying* (Harvard UP, 2004), *Bodily Charm: Living Opera* (U of Nebraska P, 2000), and *Opera: Desire, Disease, and Death* (U of Nebraska P, 1996).

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eras, finally publishing his 1937–38 *Versuch über Wagner* (*In Search of Wagner*) in 1952. However, it would take another three or four decades to attract to the field of opera studies scholars who worked in such diverse areas as political science (Arblaster; Bokina), philosophy (Magee; Kitcher and Schacht; Goehr and Herwitz), history (Steinberg, *Listening*; Robinson), philology (Borchmeyer), psychoanalysis (Poizat; Lacoue-Labarthe; Žižek; Žižek and Dolar; Bronfen), and medicine (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, *Opera: Desire* and *Opera: The Art*). By the 1990s, special issues of journals were documenting the increasing number of interdisciplinary conferences on opera: for instance, *New German Critique* 69 (autumn 1996) contains many of the papers from the controversial conference Wagner and the Consequences, held in 1995 at Columbia University, the site of the famous public conversation between two (politically) unlikely friends, the Palestinian American literary theorist Edward W. Said and the Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim about Wagner's anti-Semitism (Barenboim and Said 79–110).

It is no accident that the same decades of the 1980s and '90s saw the flourishing of not only poststructuralism, new historicism, and cultural studies but also what has been called the new musicology, which gave increased attention to both musical meaning and its cultural, social, religious, sexual, and political contexts. The important collaboration between the musicologist Roger Parker and the comparative literary scholar Arthur Groos led to significant multidisciplinary opera conferences (such as the one on opera librettos at Cornell University in 1986) and subsequent publications (see Groos and Parker), as well as to the founding of a journal that would prove to be central to the development of the field, *Cambridge Opera Journal*. The openness of some—though by no means all—musicologists to interdisciplinary work meant that it became easier for nonmusicologists to publish research on opera, despite strong disciplinary differences. New, more inclusive book series helped make this possible (e.g., Princeton Studies in Opera, established in 1991).

Enter Identity Politics and Cultural Studies

The impact of feminist theory on the study of music further opened up the possibilities for new perspectives on opera, both within musicology (thanks to the groundbreaking work of Susan McClary and others) and outside it. When Catherine Clément's 1979 feminist fugue *L'opéra: ou, La défaite des femmes* was translated into English in 1988 (as *Opera; or, The Undoing of Women*), it made space for collective volumes like Mary Ann Smart's *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera* (which grew out of an important interdisciplinary conference, again in 1995, at the State University of New York, Stony Brook). Another book, *The Work of Opera: Genre, Nationhood, and Sexual Difference* (Dellamora and Fischlin), had its origins in a special session at the MLA convention in 1993. As the titles of the last two volumes suggest, sexuality soon joined gender as a major concern in opera studies: Wayne Koestenbaum's provocative and highly personal *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* was published in the same year as that MLA session was held. Less than twelve months later, the musicologist Philip Brett, whose work on the operas of Benjamin Britten had already brought a gay perspective to opera studies, coedited (with Elizabeth Wood and Gary C. Thomas) a collective volume punningly entitled *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*. The next year, *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera* (Blackmer and Smith) offered a queer history of opera particularly sensitive to the repression or fear of female homoeroticism in the nineteenth century and to the reveling in it at the fin de siècle. With the publication in that year as well of Sam Abel's *Opera in the*

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Flesh: Sexuality in Operatic Performance and Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope's *The Diva's Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics*, both queer studies and feminism became mainstream in opera studies and were now approaches no one in the field could ignore. As a result, with the advent of "body criticism," that massive collaborative enterprise to write the cultural history of the body, the musical and operatic body too came under scholarly scrutiny (Leppert; Hutcheon and Hutcheon, *Bodily Charm*).

Questions of race and cultural representation in opera were raised by literary scholars like Sander L. Gilman even earlier than this (and in conjunction with sexuality), but it was Marc Weiner's controversial study, *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination*, examining how the composer's representations of the physical body on stage made incarnate his anti-Semitic beliefs in codes recognizable to a nineteenth-century audience, that catalyzed the study of opera in a new and different political context: that of race and, later, postcoloniality. In Wagner studies, race had always been an issue (e.g., Millington; Rose), but rarely before Weiner's book had Adorno's charge that the ideological work of music drama is a function of its formal organization been so cogently and convincingly taken up. The work of the musicologist Ralph Locke on the construction of the oriental other in European opera reminded scholars of the significance of the imperial context in which much of the European operatic canon was composed and initially received (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, "Displacement"; Said 111–32). Herbert Lindenberger's comprehensive and incisive reading of the orientalism of nineteenth- and twentieth-century opera in the chapter "Opera/Orientalism/Otherness" in his *Opera in History: From Monteverdi to Cage* brought home the crucial importance of what Lindenberger calls a "genuinely historically based aesthetics" in unpacking the politics of opera's production and reception. Going beyond the now traditional analysis of representations of orientalized figures like Salome or Dalila as standing for the repressed desires of a culture "that transferred these desires to a place distant and powerless enough to allow free interpretive access," Lindenberger also addresses the composers' use of new musical modes and rhythms that fuel the contemporaneous audience's need for "new sonic territories to spice up standard period styles that had come to sound conventional—just as these new orientalist territories would all too soon themselves count as conventional" (190). What we today write off as musical kitsch or purple passages are accurately reread in their initial historical context, and in the process the lines of demarcation between "high art" opera and popular culture are productively blurred.

In short, the impact of all the major theoretical and ideological concerns in literary and cultural studies over the last few decades was likewise felt (sometimes with a certain delay) in the interdisciplinary scholarship on opera as a cultural artifact. In addition, because operas are most often adaptations of novels or plays and are themselves frequently adapted for or transferred to film, they have also come to the attention of theorists of the media overlap (Joe and Rose; Citron; Tambling; Marvin and Thomas; Grover-Friedlander; Schroeder), as well as those addressing the history and theory of adaptation (Balestrini; Schmidgall; Rosmarin). David Levin's *Richard Wagner, Fritz Lang, and the Nibelungen: The Dramaturgy of Disavowal* is exemplary in the way it works with what Levin calls the "historically overdetermined" *Nibelungen* material in relation to German history to deal not only with the early *Nibelungenlied* source texts but also with Lang's 1920s films *Die Nibelungen* (especially *Siegfried*) and Wagner's *Ring* cycle of music dramas. Careful to treat the different media in their own terms, this study nonetheless brings the three together, and the result is a mutual illumination of the politics of

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aesthetics and the relation of art to German cultural nationalism—and, therefore, to ethnicity and exclusion.

If the 1990s saw the flowering of interdisciplinary opera studies, the new century has witnessed its more formal institutionalization (although the Lyrica Society for Word-Music Relations, founded in 1981, has always included opera in its broader mandate for its conference sessions and publications). In 2000 the MLA approved the creation of the Discussion Group on Opera as a Literary and Dramatic Form. The *University of Toronto Quarterly* devoted two issues to the topic Opera and Interdisciplinarity in 2003 and 2005 (72.4 and 74.2). The fact that all the plenary speakers at the international conference Verdi 2001, celebrating the centenary of the composer's death, were nonmusicologists was another landmark in what we might call the "interdisciplining" of opera studies (see Della Seta, Marvin, and Marica). In 2005 Oxford University Press announced that the *Opera Quarterly* would shift its focus to concentrate on performance, literary and cultural theory, and history. The newly reconstituted editorial board reflects this broadened mandate, bringing together scholars of history, musicology, literary theory, and performance studies. In all these new interdisciplinary sites, literary scholars have brought their particular interpretive skills to the study of opera in increasing numbers and have had an important influence on the field.

Literary Theory Goes to the Opera

An immense variety of critical approaches and theoretical assumptions circulate in literary studies today, and any of them may cross over to opera studies. This section will briefly examine the work of a number of differently oriented and, indeed, differently trained literary scholars working in the field. In a recent study, *Interpreting Wagner*, the author, James Treadwell, offers self-reflexive, allegorical readings of Wagner's dramas that only a literarily trained critic could, although not in any obvious thematic sense. Using his own "engulfing" experience at Bayreuth as a model for the power of (and resistance to) Wagner's work as "theatrical enchantment," Treadwell reads the composer's three early "Romantic" operas self-reflexively as dramas of enchantment and the supernatural that explore how opera itself works: "Enchantment is what they are all about, because enchantment is what happens when music's magic exerts itself on the human world" (41–42)—at least according to the German Romantic "aesthetic of rapture" that Treadwell sees Wagner opposing to Parisian bourgeois entertainment (43). Although all the composer's works are treated to a holistic analysis of their theatrical, philosophical, and literary, as well as musical, dimensions, Treadwell goes on to deconstruct with great subtlety the disturbing political and aesthetic sureties of Wagner's prose essays, using the multimedia complexities of the composer's operatic art to argue that the music is more open, more ambivalent, than the written texts, including the librettos. Lawrence Kramer's similarly deconstructive reading of Wagner's *Lohengrin* shows how the work enacts its own incompatibility with the worldview underlying Wagner's narrative of the crisis and redemption of modernity (*Opera* 42–74).

It may well be the personal and political history of this particular composer, as much as the work itself, that has openly provoked the study of such aporias. Certainly not all literary scholars' work on opera has been inflected by deconstruction. Mikhail Bakhtin's work, for instance, has also played an important role, as have various of the newer forms of historicism (see Emerson). Sandra Corse's three book-length studies—*Opera and the Uses of Language: Mozart, Verdi, and Britten*, *Wagner and the New Consciousness: Language and Love in the* Ring, and, most recent, *Operatic Subjects: The Evolution of Self in Modern Opera*—reveal both a literary scholar's

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attention to the subtleties of language and dramatic convention and a musicologist's concern for musical structure. Her latest book's central theme, as its title suggests, is opera's contribution to the delineation of modern subjectivity, a topic much discussed in recent decades, especially in literary studies. Opera scholarship joined these debates with Gary Tomlinson's earlier work on how the operatic voice locates the subject in the world. Corse's bold position is that opera combines the social interaction of characters with a representation (through both words and music) of a complex and contradictory interiority in a way that far surpasses, for example, the novel as a means of exploring inner consciousness. Operatic subjects are the products of physical, embodied characters presented on the theatrical stage *plus* the music that accompanies their words and actions; thus, opera contributes in a special way to our understanding of the contradictions of modern subjectivity.

Herbert Lindenberger too has long been a major voice in the comparative study of opera, bringing to it extensive historical depth, broad theoretical range, and an encyclopedic knowledge of literature and opera—early and late, canonical and avant-garde. His 1984 *Opera: The Extravagant Art* was one of the first extended attempts to look at opera through the lenses of literary issues such as representation and genre in order to argue for a "high style" definition of opera as a unique and extravagant form, "distinctly ceremonial, highly formalized" (27). Arguing even more forcefully than he does here for the unavoidable historical and social rooting of opera, Lindenberger in his later book *Opera in History: From Monteverdi to Cage* shows the close connections between, for instance, John Cage's *Europeras 1 & 2* and postmodern theory or Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and nineteenth-century philology and German identity. In the latter discussion, Lindenberger shows how the *Ring*, like the great novels of the period, was linked to intellectual and aesthetic thinking that was central to the age. But because Wagner also succumbed to an earlier period's epic impulse, Lindenberger claims that the work should be read alongside Camões's *Os Lusíadas*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, with their shared encyclopedic range, desire to pass on wisdom to a specific community, and formal, even lofty, style and tone. Yet he uses the *Ring* to illuminate and make sense out of a series of specific and diverse nineteenth-century issues:

> the enthusiasm for what people took to be the early medieval German world, or the difficulties encountered by artists in renewing the epic tradition, or the fascination with origins and the need to make tight cause-and-effect narrative connections, or the preoccupation with incest and adultery as modes of transgression, or an artist's need to rethink the ending of his work as he rethinks his attitude toward the historical events taking place around him. (158)

All Lindenberger's essays and books have forced us to consider central questions for opera studies, such as what makes opera unique among the dramatic genres ("Why" 257).

While Lindenberger argues for opera's extravagance, the composer and professor of both English and music Lawrence Kramer focuses on its normalizing power, its limits of "supremacy and debasement" that in fact define normality (*Opera*). Both scholars anchor their analyses in musical and literary detail, and they would no doubt agree that poststructuralism and new historicism alike "affirm that the meaning of a text, representation, or cultural practice is multiply determined and exceeds what such things declare themselves to mean" (Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice* xii). But Kramer is the more Derridean in his use of the concept of dissemination to get at the intertextually and historically saturated mixed-media form that is opera. Perhaps for this reason, reception of Kramer's work has been more complicated than that of Linden-

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berger's. For some, American musicology "has finally produced an Adorno . . . [who] has made it a mission to deepen music's contact with other disciplines" (Youmans 117); for others, he is simply conducting an "ethnomusicology of opera" that becomes "tiresome" (Rohling). But, as Kramer himself points out, by the turn of the millennium three major topics were of concern to interdisciplinary opera studies—subjectivity, voice (see André; Goehr), and the "complex entanglements of sexuality, identity, gender, and desire" (*Opera* 1)—and, though he does not say so, his many books have been central to all three of them (besides the works already mentioned, see *Classical Music*; *After the Lovedeath*; *Musical Meaning*).

The Dramaturgical Turn and the New Challenge

Recent programs of the annual conferences of the American Musicological Society (AMS) show that Kramer's three topics are now central to the musicological study of opera as well. But lately there has been a "dramaturgical turn" (Minor) to treating opera primarily as a form of theater or performance, both at the AMS and in leading opera journals (see the Nov. 2004 issue of the *Cambridge Opera Journal*). The International Federation for Theatre Research has founded a working group on "music theatre" to consider "the functions and effects of music, sound and voices in theatrical processes, and the relationship between performance and experience" ("IFTR Working Groups"). The Cogut Center for the Humanities, at Brown University, held a workshop in 2006 exploring the "conceptual demands and visceral power of opera in performance," with screenings of important historical opera productions and panels with directors (such as Peter Sellars), producers (Pamela Rosenberg, San Francisco Opera), and academics from a variety of disciplines ("Cogut Center"). Individual scholars from a variety of fields have picked up on this shift: for instance, the theater historian Simon Williams uses theatrical as well as musical and cultural analysis to tackle Wagner's ideologically problematic concept of the heroic. In *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera*, the musicologist Mary Ann Smart introduces the idea that music can surround and animate the (especially female) body on the operatic stage; enhancing the enacted action, music becomes what she calls "gestural."

Performers, but also audiences and directors, have now moved to the academic center stage (e.g., Steinberg, "*Die Walküre*"; Risi, "Shedding" and "Die bewegende Sängerin"). David Levin's newest book, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky*, draws on his personal experience as a practicing dramaturg to "unsettle" both the theorizing and the practical realizations of the staging of opera by making us think in terms of "operatic theatricality." Opera in performance is a new kind of text that demands new kinds of reading techniques, he argues. In so doing, he is able to place this shift in the academic study of opera into the broader context of the changes occurring in opera houses around the world in this "age of the director." Electronic recording technology has made the study of past productions possible, if not uncontroversial (see the debate in the *Cambridge Opera Journal* between Levin ["Reading"] and Treadwell ["Reading"]).

It is clear that the new interdisciplinary opera studies see the art form as a complex multimedia mixture to which no single discipline or single approach can do justice. Musicology no longer has an automatic priority in determining artistic value or, especially, cultural meaning (Kramer, *Opera* 26). Musical scores become "merely *scripts* for performances—i.e., dramatic action set into motion by costumed, singing actors in a theatrical setting with live orchestra" (Clark 199). Yet when the musicologist Ryan Minor admitted to the

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Discussion Group on Opera as a Literary and Dramatic Form at the 2005 MLA convention that "musicology has yet to fully integrate opera and opera studies into *its* core concerns" and that therefore "there are enormous possibilities for scholars outside of music to be part of that process," he also issued a challenge to his interdisciplinary audience: "If musicology has yet to repatriate opera into the fold of the properly musical, then surely scholars outside of musicology could also benefit from attending to the musicality of an art form they have long viewed primarily in textual or theatrical terms." Is the new challenge for opera studies, then, presenting opera not only through other eyes but also through other ears?

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