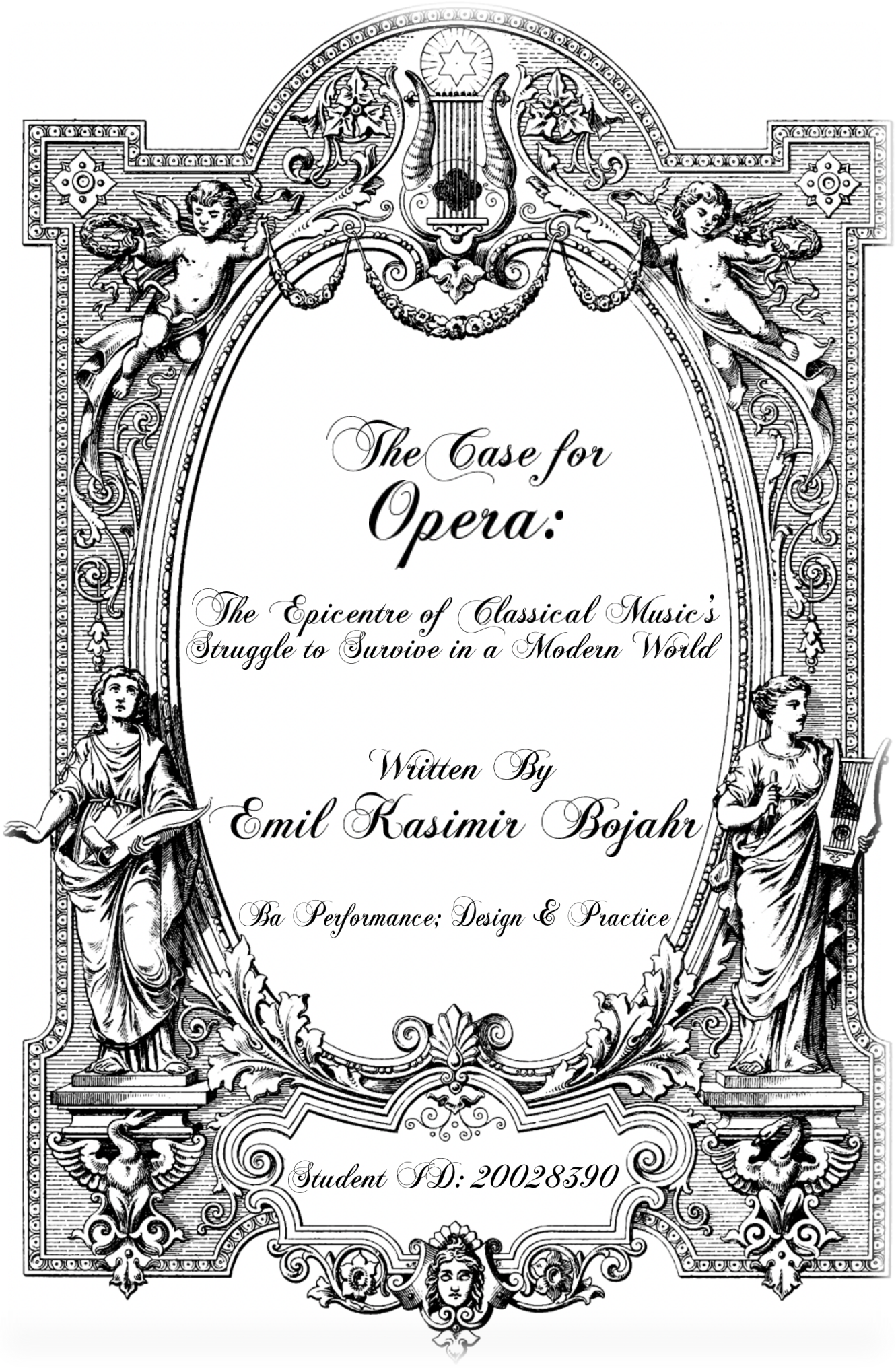


The Case for Opera:

The Epicentre of Classical Music's Struggle to Survive in a Modern World

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Introduction

Throughout the last 100 years, Western Classical Music has undergone many radical changes as it attempts to modernise and stay relevant- Specifically, the field of opera inhabiting an interesting niche of musical theatre where it has simultaneously dealt with theatrical and musical evolutions and eras. As I write my own short Chamber Opera in conjunction with this essay, I have learnt much about Modern Opera's place in society and speculate on its future in a world where it categorically falls further out of the mainstream. The history of Opera is a wide-ranging subject, and while the pre-1900s provide important historical context, I am focusing on the early modernist and avant-gardes from the early 20th Century to the mid 80s, and, within this, the anti- and anti-anti-opera as a subgenre. To help the reader understand its relevance to performance, I also want to shed light on Opera as performance and staging through a critical lens on audience and economic factors that go into programming and production.
I have included a YouTube playlist in chronological order from 1607-2023 of the works mentioned as an audio-visual aid in not only showing how music and staging has evolved but as a collection of seminal works that have influenced the writing of my opera.

https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLWDIg6R5RyiJn3YcM-FDlKyu436qAeNPB&si=6dq1MayLJIIverU5

Defining Opera

To help understand the intricacies of a tumultuous 20th Century classical music scene I feel it appropriate to provide a brief overview of the history of opera, and how the splintering of musical styles around the turn of the century informed the birth of 'Modern Opera'. For this essay, I will divide Opera into three general time periods; Late baroque to the late 19th Century romantics (1750-1890); Post-Romantic/ Early Modernist (1900-1945) and New Contemporary (post 1945- present)[1].
Throughout these times political climate and world events affected Opera just as much as they did anything else. The end of the French Revolution 'in 1799 [2] spurred on the romantic era of opera where topics of freedom and war became much more commonplace just like the reinvention of opera and explosion of musical styles that followed WWI and the years of tension leading up to it, such as the Russian revolution in 1905. At the start of the 20th Century, classical music became seen as overindulgent and too romantic in a post- war world- its heavy reliance on tonality and harmony became what newer composers such as Schönberg, Strauss and Scriabin looked to innovate, hence the birth of atonality.

Atonality can be described as anything that does not have a tonal centre- it lacks hierarchy of notes and therefore produces sound that is much more dissonant.[3] This gave composers of the time much more freedom to use rhythm or form, for example, as a primary focus in their music. Arnold Schönberg was a driving force for the atonal revolution, which to him felt like the inevitable direction that music was heading towards- the diatonic harmonies that defined romanticism were gradually dissipating and many composers were exploring atonality to different effects.
While not quite as radical as Schönberg, Richard Strauss' Operas *Elektra* (1906-1908) and *Salome* (1903-5) 'Pressed towards the brink of atonality, but [Strauss'] reaction was a retreat into the comfortable pastiche of *Der Rosenkavalier* (1909-1910)"[4], a much more tonal opera. Similarly, Alexander Scriabin's late-stage period (op.59 onwards) was on a cross collision with atonality, but he died before he made the final leap. Schönberg himself was 'acutely aware that the harmonic innovations of his time threatened the diatonic foundations of music'[5] and felt that 'atonality was the only possible medium for musical expressionism'. Schönberg along with Anton Webern and Alban Berg formed the Second Viennese School, composing modernist operas like Schönberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912), Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* (1914-1922) and *Lulu* (1935) in an atonal style, considered today an essential part of standard opera repertoire. A defining factor of 'Modern Opera' was that it became an agent of critique, much like modern art as a whole.

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[1] Hall, 'Opera through the Ages'.
[2] 'French Revolution | Royal Museums Greenwich'.
[3] 'Atonal Music | Definition, Examples & Background - Video & Lesson Transcript'.
[4] Griffiths, Paul, *Modern Music: A Concise History from Debussy to Boulez*. Page 26.
[5] Griffiths, Paul. Page 28.

Old vs Modern Opera

Opera throughout history has inhabited a certain function in society. Its Baroque origins from around 1600 started as an artform solely for the elites, where lavish costumes and extravagant sets were an opportunity to show wealth. Claudio Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (1607) is widely considered the first true opera[6], and most baroque operas tended to follow a similar plot progression and character tropes. This gradually shifted into a more naturalistic style of performance of the classical period, where the ornate and decorative styles shifted to a balanced and refined style. During the classical time, these operas began to be performed in theatrical settings, less so courtly ones, indicating an increased public interest in opera as a form of entertainment.[7] Mozart and Gluck were the most prominent opera composers of this time, composing both comedic (Opera Buffa) and serious (Opera Seria) forms of opera[8]. This paved the way towards the romantic era in which the more naturalistic style was paired with an increased sense of emotional intensity and individuality by composers, widening the scope of operatic scenography. Many of the composers of this time had developed very strong originalities in their styles and are now some of the most performed operas today. Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (1859), based on the legend of Tristan and Iseult, is known for its sweeping lines, consistent harmonies and the famous 'Tristan' chord, a chord that features at very select moments to increase the tension of a scene. The chord itself is one of tonal ambiguity, leaving it open to travel in many different directions and, after a 4 hour build up, the Tristan chord is finally resolved during the ending, 'Liebestod' (love's death). There are many other examples of unique devices being used in other operas of this time, but this only became more exaggerated as we enter the 20th century when Modern Opera is officially defined as starting.

As the post-romantic styles were developing, prominent styles such as Serialism, Neoclassicism (notably Igor Stravinsky's late neoclassical *The Rake's Progress* (1951)), Modernism and Aleatoricism, or chance music were becoming interested in their applications in opera. An interesting note is also how music notation became reflective of these newer styles.

This then led into post-1945 opera, which was again even more experimental. Opera houses at this time were starting to lose popularity- opera was seen as an 'outmoded artform'[9] and, to retain viewers, were more sceptical about putting on more contemporary operas, instead favouring those that would bring in numbers.[10] It was expensive to put on opera, even more so the more challenging newer operas[11]. At the same time, the post-war style composers were leaning heavily into the avant-garde and were less interested in opera at first, Luigi Nono being one of the first to compose an opera, *Intolleranza* (first performed 1961). Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* (1977) was a prime example of cultural critique, and pushed the boundaries of what opera is, not just through performance but music also.
Contemporary issues were becoming important themes in modern opera such as '*Nixon in China*' (1987) by John Adams, inspired by Richard Nixon's visit to the People's Republic of China in 1972. Technological developments also had massive implications in modern opera, as it has in most other forms of theatre. It made opera more accessible to a wider audience through live streaming and online archives as well as newer modernised productions using projection mapping, again garnering more interest for opera goers.

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[6] 'A Brief History of Opera'.
[7] Team, 'The Evolution of Opera'.
[8] 'Serious and Comic Opera in Eighteenth-Century Italy'.
[9] Hall, 'Opera through the Ages'.
[10] 'Notes on Opera's Exquisite Corpse on JSTOR'.
[11] Clements, 'Opera in the Modern Age'.



Top Left: Alban Berg '*Wozzeck'* at the Liceu, Barcelona 2022

Below Left: Schönberg '*Pierrot Lunaire'* performed at the Southbank Centre by Patricia Kopatchinskaja, 2023

Below Right: Richard Strauss '*Salomé'* performed by Malin Byström at the Royal Opera House, 2018







Left: Luigi Nono '*Intolleranza'* Premiere, Venice 1961

Bottom Right: Richard Strauss '*Elektra'*: Performed by Nina Stemme at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, 2019

Bottom Left: Alban Berg '*Lulu'*: Conducted by Daniel Barenboim, Staatskapelle 2012





Anti- Opera and Anti-Anti-Opera

The Hungarian composer György Ligeti (1923-2006) composed his only full-length opera in 1977, *Le Grand Macabre* (*LGM*). It would become one of the most influential modernist operas, originally intended to follow the style of the avant-garde opera by Mauricio Kagel, *Staatstheater* (1970). Throughout the mid-century period it was challenging for opera composers to have their works put on- if it was too experimental, it would be rejected but on the contrary if it felt too traditional (even neoclassical), then the composer would be seen as 'sacrificing artistic integrity for the sake of public favour'[12]. It was in this vein that Ligeti wanted to create an opera that ticked both boxes; a more conventional sounding opera yet still boundary pushing. Thus, anti-opera and anti-anti-opera became commonplace terms, birthed by the composing climate of the post-war world.

Having fled Hungary to West Germany in 1957, due to unrest over soviet control, Ligeti became enthralled by the world of the avant-garde at the time, pioneered by Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez and John Cage.[13] Performance filled a greater role in music composed from this time, as genres such as aleatoric music (chance music in which the musician determines how it is played, leading to unique performances[14]) were on the rise. Putting more focus on the performance itself was a way for more dissonant music to be enjoyed more easily by a casual audience, alongside exploring how indeterminacy combines with notated instruction. It was in similar ways that Kagel and Ligeti were composing their first operas. Ligeti's first ventures into opera were his mini-operas *Aventures* (1962) and *Nouvelles Aventures* (1965). These, along with Kagel's *Staatstheater,* became prime examples of an anti-opera. The defining characteristic of both the anti- and the anti-anti-opera is parody of traditional opera, containing stylisations, quotations, allusions and pastiches of classical opera, but used at different structural levels to create the parody or satire.[15] The main difference between the two terms is that anti-opera subverts to a deep structural level- both staging and music are contained within the parody, whereas anti-anti-opera keeps to the convention of opera only in form, staging and theatre[16]. It was in this way that Ligeti created his modernist anti-anti- opera *Le Grand Macabre* (*LGM*), essentially returning back to an opera form, which *Staatstheater* was not.

The satire present in *LGM* reflects a much more sombre reality than initially presented. Having lost most of his family in the Holocaust and fleeing from Soviet control, Ligeti was very wary of dogmatic ideologies and incorporated this idea into *LGM*, his character Nektrotzar parodying the dictators of the 20th Century- a "Sinister, shady, demagogic figure, humourless, pretentious and with an unshakeable sense of mission"[17]. Whilst shrouded in comedy, Ligeti creates a more meaningful dialogue and critique that underscores the humorous elements.

Ligeti's process of writing *LGM* in a subversive, anti-theatrical way also shaped his composing style from then on. Throughout the 1960s and early 70s he was particularly well-known for his use of micropolyphony ('huge static sound masses, often chromatic and dissonant, [forming] different melodic fragments'[18]) but he realised this would not translate well to opera. Voices performing micropolyphony would be similar to the effect that Björn Heile, an academic specialising in contemporary classical music, felt as to why *Staatstheater* was not as

[12] Searby, 'Ligeti's "Le Grand Macabre"'.
[13] 'Aventures and Nouvelles Aventures, György Ligeti'.
[14] '11.3'.
[15] 'Defining Anti-Anti-Opera'.
[16] 'Defining Anti-Anti-Opera'.
[17] Service, 'Ligeti's Riot through History'.
[18] 'A Guide to Ligeti's Style'.

performed- 'in the absence of an over-arching narrative…. [Kagel] faced the problem of making the interplay of visual and acoustic elements "meaningful"'[19]. To create an overarching narrative for Ligeti, it would mean that micropolyphony would be useless, as sung and spoken words would be indistinguishable in a cluster of notes. His subsequent reversion to earlier techniques of classical composers, and thus his parody of them is what helps define this as an anti-anti-opera. By inserting melodic shapes and other elements frowned upon by the avant-gardes he was able to make this distinction from the anti-opera.

The importance of this development in contemporary music was that it helped blur the lines even more between theatre and opera- the music of *LGM* has a ''supporting role and intensifies the drama in a direct way'[20]. The introduction of composed music as a way to further exaggerate the emotional tones and immerse the audience in a more radical way to musical theatre is why contemporary opera should not be understated as a genre.









Top Left: John Adams '*Nixon in China*', performed June 2006
Top Right: Theatrical trailer for TheaterBonn production of Mauricio Kagel's '*Staatstheater*'
Bottom Left: Richard Wagner '*Tristan und Isolde*', performed 1993
Bottom Right: György Ligeti '*Le Grand Macabre*', English National Opera, 2009

[19] Everett, 'Signification of Parody and the Grotesque in György Ligeti's Le Grand Macabre'.
[20] Searby, 'Ligeti's "Le Grand Macabre"'. Page 5

Staging and Controversy

In their attempts to keep opera alive and bring in newer audiences, opera houses began to modernise productions of traditional opera, to varied effect. The difficulty of this lay not only in finding relevance from a story in historical society with nuanced views and translating that into a modern setting (it would seem ill-fitting for performers in modern day clothing to sing 19th century music and sing about tuberculosis), but also in keeping the production not too far removed from the music itself. The music will stay the same but to create a contemporary production a delicate balance must be struck for it to work. Would it make sense to have an abstract and conceptual production to music that is rooted in conservatism? What defines 'traditional'? Is an opera set in a time before the composer's time traditional if it uses period costumes of the composer's time or of the setting of the opera? Considerations like these can set purists and traditionalists against the radicals and newer audiences, why try to please them both?

The use of digital technology in the 21st century has relieved some of the pressure on this dilemma- as companies began to use projection mapping, augmented-reality and a plethora of other technologies at a much lower cost the capabilities for innovation increased dramatically. The restrictive production conventions of an opera production (a seated orchestra, unamplified voices, etc.) have been a major obstacle in creating a digitally enhanced scenography, but as technologies became more cost-efficient, companies like *Komische Oper Berlin*, known for its style of Regietheater, or Victorian Opera in Melbourne have integrated digital backdrops and stereoscopic scenery, requiring the audience to wear 3-D glasses to see the full visual effect[21]. A fascinating result of this seldom seen feature in opera is how the use of digital technologies shifts from enriching a physical production to changing the 'fundamental relationship between live performers and digital elements'[22]

A proposed classification of different systems of digital integration was proposed in 2017 by Caitlin Vincent, Jordan Beth Vincent, Kim Vincs and Katya Johanson in which 3 categories; Non-Synthesis, Partial- Synthesis and Full-Synthesis are outlined. Non- Synthesis describes the use of digital technology that is a substitute for painted scenery or to outline emotive undercurrents- a layer of effect that does not interact directly with the performers. Partial-Synthesis is where the interaction of both live and digital elements form the scenography and require the other to function. An example of this is in Jake Heggie and Gene Scheer's *Moby Dick* (2010), where whale boats were projected with hidden handles for performers to hold on to, to create the illusion they were sitting in these boats. Full- Synthesis is a complete dominance of the digital over physical- the production cannot exist without the presence of the digital. In the 2012 production of Barrie Kosky's (artistic director of *Komische Oper Berlin*) *Magic Flute*, every set element was digital- the character *Monostatos* holds the digital leash for two digital dogs, as an example.[23]

This has been a cause for concern for some opera goers and critics, often mentioning the struggle for power between live and digitally enhanced elements or the interference of aesthetic that the digital can bring, adding a new challenge for the use of technology in productions and artistic directors.

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[21] Vincent, 'Opera's Digital Revolution May Be the Key to Increasing the Artform's Appeal'.
[22] Vincent et al., 'The Intersection of Live and Digital'.
[23] Vincent et al.

Audience

Audience is naturally a very crucial part to the functioning of an opera house, whether that is for bringing in revenue or gaining exposure for the opera. One of the main challenges facing opera houses today is an ageing audience, much like the rest of the classical music world. The question of how to keep current audiences and opera lovers satisfied while bringing in and, more importantly, retaining newer and younger audiences remains. Many opera houses in different countries have tried their own ways of doing this, most commonly the modernised productions of traditional opera and putting on smaller, contemporary opera, working to a moderate degree of success. The English Touring Opera has put on their opera films in cinemas, to garner more interest with different mediums[24], however this produced a more unexpected outcome than increasing in-person attendance to opera productions. The screened operas were popular as the price of seats that would have given poor visibility in an opera house now gave the front row experience with different accessibility needs much more easily met.[25]

Opera's beginnings focused on the white elite and continued to do so throughout much of its history. Now that we live in a much more globalised society where opera has gone past its late 16th century origins, there is no excuse for it to cater to one demographic and represent within its cast, music, musicians and culture a dominant white perspective. Marginalised communities form an important part of audience culture and opera struggles to rid itself of an elitist and classist past. Companies have now started to feature and commission more works by women, queer people and POC as well as create a diverse and inclusive work environment for performers and crew alike. While there is a long way to go for this and is not something that should be immediately celebrated, as this should have started much longer than 50 years ago, it is something I hope to see in the future of opera and the contemporary classical music scene.

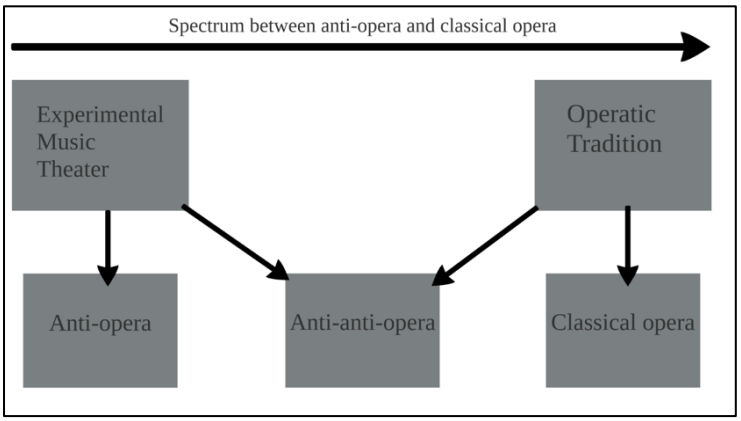
This becomes especially ironic when works like Rossini's *La Cenerentola* (1817), a variation on the fairy tale Cinderella are performed at Glyndebourne festival, a British opera festival where tickets are extremely expensive and notoriously hard to acquire. In an article on experimental music theatre and contemporary opera, Björn Heile wrote about his experience there, saying that he "was left wondering how much of the- rather problematic- class and gender politics of the opera resonated with them."[26] It highlights the sardonicism of putting on operas about class and other societal issues to a small percentage of those who aren't affected by it and poses the question of how much is taken as entertainment for the elite, but also how that narrative can be challenged.

Audience culture itself can vary in different countries. My research has found that in North America, it is common for an audience to leave as the final curtain drops whereas in European cities the audience stays longer[27]. While this does not sound immediately like a ground-breaking difference, it shows how the general attitude towards attendance and the relationship between opera companies and audience greatly impact its survival. Opera houses find it much more challenging to put on enough high budget productions due to funding issues- arts funding in general has declined and with a limited budget compromises are made.[28] Therefore, maintaining a good relationship with their audience can dictate the success of an opera house.

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[24] Service, 'Opera in Cinemas'.
[25] Service.
[26] Heile, 'Recent Approaches to Experimental Music Theatre and Contemporary Opera'.
[27] 'What Audiences Can Bring to an Opera Performance | Operavore'.
[28] 'What Audiences Can Bring to an Opera Performance | Operavore'.

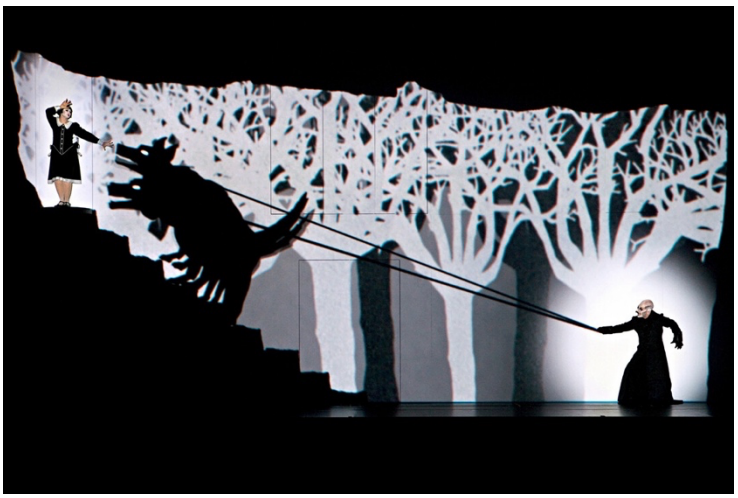
For example, Barcelona audiences are said to be the best in the world[29], treating opera as a special occasion even if they attend frequently. The culture of being immersed in the show, even in intervals and afterwards has created good rapport with opera companies and a sustainable and motivating factor in continuous performances there.[30] On the contrary, where this doesn't happen it can create a windfall effect where opera companies no longer receive donations, or are forced to increase ticket prices, which has the knock on effect of losing viewers, that "alienate people for whom operagoing was once a pleasurable tradition rather than a once-a-year event."[31]











Top Right: Regietheater of Richard Strauss' '*Elektra'*, War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco, 2017
Top Left: Right: Diagram showing position of anti- and anti-anti-opera in relation to musical theatre
Middle Left: Rossini's '*La Cenerentola'* performed at Volksoper Wien, 2022
Middle Right: Jake Heggie & Gene Scheer' 2010 production of '*Moby Dick'*
Bottom Left: Komische Oper Berlin's production of Mozart's '*Die Zauberflöte*' directed by Barrie Kosky

[29] Heile, 'Recent Approaches to Experimental Music Theatre and Contemporary Opera'.
[30] 'What Audiences Can Bring to an Opera Performance | Operavore'.
[31] 'What Audiences Can Bring to an Opera Performance | Operavore'.

Economics of Opera and Modernisation

There are several different social and economic factors that determine engagement and commercial success of a newer work. The amount of contemporary works written after 1945 are huge in number, but out of them only a few are even sporadically performed. Instead, programmes are mostly reliant on a small handful of classical and romantic operas- leading to an almost identical run of shows between most opera houses[32]. The two main factors that determine what operas are put on are; audience engagement seen through box office success and what experts believe would promote future audience growth and development of opera as a genre. While audiences in general want similar things, there has been criticism about the lack of variety and artistry in the shows that are put on. Contemporary opera often disrupts tradition within opera which make creating an interesting season more of a challenge, if not a welcome one.

I have decided to focus in-depth on a study conducted by Alex Turrini which attempts to uncover what economic conditions affect programming choices revealing a number of social and political questions of how this happens.[33] In a number of hypotheses it outlines the effects of; opera houses' occupancy rate; % of revenue provided by private sources; number of subscribers to an opera house; % of revenue provided by the state; % of revenue provided by local government and openness of local community to risk on the propensity of opera houses to include more contemporary works. The dependent variable of this experiment was the likelihood to 'adopt modern and contemporary programming strategies'. It is worth noting that I have only included relevant information to my own investigation. The supported hypotheses were that:

1- The higher an opera house's occupancy rate, the lower its propensity to adopt modern and contemporary programming strategies.

In directly contributing to box office sales, the risk undertaken by newer works as well as reliance on contributions that are needed by an opera house leads to a fallback onto safer and more traditional programmes that help to secure this.

2- The higher its number of subscribers, the higher an opera house's propensity to adopt modern and contemporary programming strategies.

Subscribers to an opera house usually form the backbone of regular attendance. This group of people therefore are more open to expanding their knowledge of a specific niche in the music world and trust opera houses more in their programming choices.

3- The higher the percentage of total revenues provided by local government, the lower an opera house's propensity to adopt modern and contemporary programming strategies.

A local government determines the success of their financial support by audience numbers, and opera houses therefore are pressured to put on more traditional work, often prompted by the more conservative tastes of law makers, but also pressure to keep attendance high.

4- In communities that are open to risk, the higher an opera house's occupancy rate, the higher its propensity to adopt modern and contemporary programming strategies.

In local communities where progressive and entrepreneurial people outnumber conservatives, usually in larger or capital cities, they will be the majority in opera house attendance. Due to

[32] Botstein, 'Notes from the Editor'.
[33] 'The Phantom of Modern Opera: How Economics and Politics Affect the Programming Strategies of Opera Houses on JSTOR'.

their inclination to come to enjoy not necessarily a specific opera, but go for the experience, opera houses will be more inclined to take risks with newer works.[34]

I found this study quite insightful and, even if this is a study contained to one country (Italy) and not representative of opera culture and attendance outside of Italy, a lot of what is described can, however unscientifically, be logically relevant to other scenarios and paint a bigger picture of the current climate within opera attendance as a generalisation. In London, I have seen that the English National Opera (*ENO*), has a much larger demographic of younger people, creatives and diverse attendees compared to the Royal Opera House (*ROH*). Having attended both a number of times and been in an *ENO* production of Jacques Offenbach's '*Le Contes D'Hoffman*' (1881) in 2012, the *ENO* makes greater efforts in being more accessible when providing newer/ riskier works, as well as singing in English. While not making a huge degree of a difference, it makes the opera more understandable as a story and allows for more concentration on stage. The *ENO* also tends to put on many more contemporary works, such as Philip Glass' '*Akhnaten'* (1983) and Paul Ruder's '*The Handmaids Tale'* (1998) in recent years, 2023 and 2024, respectively, while interspersing them with more conventional operas. While the *ROH* does put on contemporary works such as George Benjamin's '*Picture a Day Like This'* (2023) it tends to show them in the much smaller, but no less impressive Linbury Theatre.



Top Left: Philip Glass '*Akhnaten'* Act II Scene 4- Hymn to the Sun. English National Opera, 2023
Top Right: George Benjamin '*Picture a Day Like This'*. Royal Opera House Linbury Theatre, 2023
Bottom Right: Paul Ruders '*The Handmaid's Tale'*. English National Opera, 2022
Top Right: Jacques Offenbach '*Les Contes D'Hoffman'* English National Opera, 2012

[34] 'The Phantom of Modern Opera: How Economics and Politics Affect the Programming Strategies of Opera Houses on JSTOR'.

‘Der Kakerlakenkönig’

I have been composing a short opera, ‘*Der Kakerlakenkönig’* (The Cockroach King) for my Live at CSM project and as a practical outcome for my research on this essay. I wanted to continue exploring how the lines between theatre, performance and music intersect and challenge myself to consider all these elements when writing my own opera. As my research has progressed, so too have my ideas and writing I was originally intending to compose in a more traditional operatic style, but as I became more aware of my limitations for this and as I researched further into 20th Century music it developed into a more atonal style which would fit the nature of the performance. I am writing for are 2 violins, cello, piano and 2 singers (soprano and tenor) aiming for a maximum 10-minute piece. A challenge to an instrumentation like this is to create an effective range of texture and timbre to balance the piece- using a full range of techniques available to each instrument and familiarity to these is important. Considerations for this are to use them to heighten the emotive intensity of a scene and to create an atmosphere in which the opera takes place. For example, the first act of the opera takes place in a dark underworld, to build this world sonically, I am using lower registers and a *pianissimo* dynamic paired with thick and muddy textures to create a darkness from which the anti-hero, the Kakerlakenkönig comes out of.
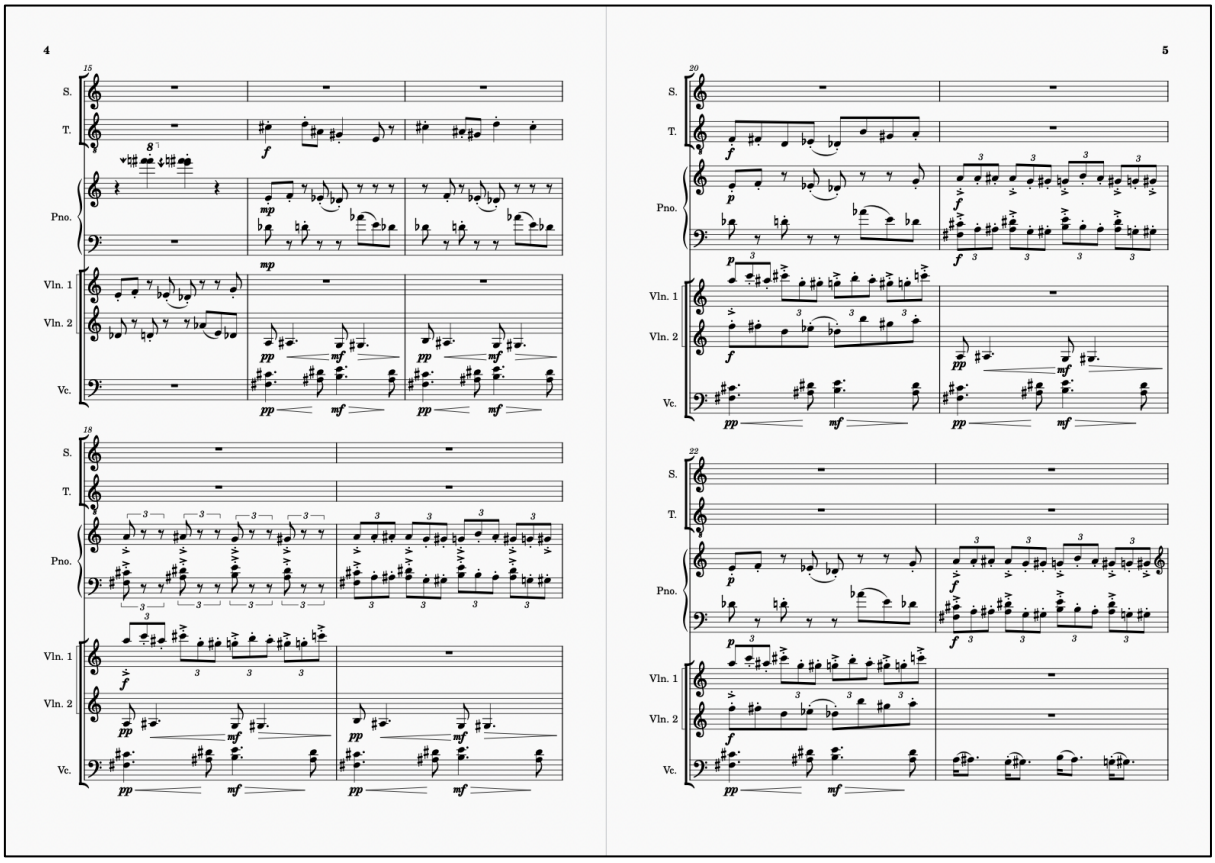
Inspired by classic opera plots and the drama that emerges from them, my opera concerns a man fallen from grace, lamenting over his lost love, the ‘Blaue Dame’ (Blue Lady), who is approached by a devil like figure promising he can be reunited with her on the condition that he be turned into a cockroach, readily agreeing and undergoing the transformation, thus ends Act I. Act II focuses on the Blue Lady and her desire to be reunited with her lover, all the while The Cockroach King is slowly making his way to her until he reaches the final step where she mistakenly steps on him, killing him. Laying dying in her arms, the two begin a duet for Act III ending in his final breath and her unending guilt. This story provides many different compositional avenues to create this tension and heartbreak, and a journey from start to finish. Containing this within ten minutes and creating peaks and troughs is an intimidating challenge which requires a lot of planning.

I have been influenced by a number of works to create this story, each of which led me to make decisions for structure, harmony and rhythm, to name a few. The Russian composers of the early 20th century have provided a backbone for harmonic and melodic devices; Nikolai Medtner’s piano music like his ‘*Forgotten Melodies’* (Op.38), Prokofiev’s piano sonatas and Rachmaninov’s ‘*The Bells’* (Op.35) and ‘*Spring Cantata’*(Op.20) all communicate a fairytale-like story to me and made me think about how I would weave in an overarching emotional narrative coherently with smaller plot elements. Paul Hindemith’s ‘*Melancholie’*(Op.13) and Arnold Schönberg’s ‘*Pierrot Lunaire’*(Op.21) both showed me the possibilities and the beauty of writing for a small ensemble with voice and helped me visualise how I could begin composing my piece.

Starting off by sketching out a few ideas on the piano and playing around with different rhythmic or harmonic variations, I write them down onto manuscript paper as a piano part only. As I am composing atonally, I am intentionally not thinking about what harmonies or notes I want to use, not even instrument ranges, as the core of what I want to begin with is simply harmony, rough melody, and later rhythm. I then transcribe that onto composing software. From there I start to develop those ideas into something larger, whether that is still contained within a piano part or fleshing out certain ideas into a full instrumentation, using the playback feature to get a rough idea of how it sounds with the right instruments. This provides its own

challenges as the instrument sounds are not very accurate and a human touch is missing to make it come alive. Nevertheless, it is still useful to hear a closer sound to a real performance and using this alongside playing it back on my own piano, enough of a balance is met to make me satisfied. Then comes the more difficult development into a full orchestration and balancing sounds- the style I am composing in is not a classical one, so I forcefully lean into extremes of atonality and sequences- I do not have to concern myself with a balanced sound, as this is intentionally written with that in mind. This helps me to create different textures and highs and lows as I create my equilibrium with more extremes of difference.
Libretto is another word for lyrics, and I have been through many options and alternatives in how this is best communicated to the audience. Originally, I wanted the libretto to be in German and use surtitles above the stage for an English translation, but I think that writing it in English would be more appropriate to an English audience.

Throughout the process of writing this I saw more and more why contemporary opera is needed in a modern world, not only as a musical medium, but the niche it inhabits in the crossover of music and theatre still has so much potential for creating an expansive industry for creatives, through all the jobs it offers, music and stage-wise. The immersion it creates with the addition of music is something invaluable to me and not often seen outside of opera houses.



Short extract from the score of '*Der Kakerlakenkönig*'

Conclusion

As opera continues to struggle in a world where classical music is no longer the mainstream, the human input required through musicians, composers, backstage crew, makers etc. and the style of performance make it hard to replace- a piece of living history that remains unchanged at its core. A powerful tool for social critique, contemporary opera is a fascinating intersection between theatre and music and as a genre it has so many avenues for development through digital scenography and modernised productions. The difficulty however lies in programme management and decisions for opera companies to put on a select few number of traditional operas, with little expansion into the plethora of contemporary works. Due to funding, fear of revenue loss and conservative tastes, opera will not survive if it doesn't find a way to keep equilibrium between traditional and contemporary opera and to keep audiences engaged.

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Gioachino Rossini- "La Cenerentola" (1817)
Richard Wagner- "Tristan und Isolde" (1859)
Jacques Offenbach- "Les Contes D'Hoffman" (1881)
Sergei Rachmaninov- "Spring Cantata" (1902)
Richard Strauss- "Salomé" (1903-5)
Richard Strauss- "Elektra" (1906-8)
Richard Strauss- "Der Rosenkavalier" (1909-10)
Arnold Schönberg- "Pierrot Lunaire" (1912)
Sergei Rachmaninov- "The Bells" (1913)
Paul Hindemith- "Melancholie" (1917-19)
Nikolai Medtner- "Forgotten Melodies" (1919-20)
Alban Berg- "Wozzeck" (1914-22)
Alban Berg- "Lulu" (1935)
Igor Stravinsky- "The Rake's Progress" (1951)
Luigi Nono- "Intolleranza" (1960)
György Ligeti- "Aventures" (1962)
György Ligeti- "Nouvelles Aventures" (1965)
Mauricio Kagel- "Staatstheater" (1970)
György Ligeti- "Le Grand Macabre" (1977)
Philip Glass- "Akhnaten" (1983)
John Adams- "Nixon in China" (1987)
Paul Ruder- "The Handmaid's Tale" (1998)
George Benjamin- "Picture a Day like This" (2023)

Glossary

Atonality- A style of music that does not have a tonal centre- it lacks hierarchy of notes and therefore produces sound that is much more dissonant

Diatonic- Referring to the use of notes only present in the appropriate key signature/ scale it relates to

Post-Romanticism- Composing style of classical music in a transitional style of modernism and romanticism from the late 19th- early 20th Century

Modernism- .Composing style defined by defying convention to an extreme degree and searching for alternate forms of tonal language

New Contemporary- Post-1945 music

Tonality- Arrangement of pitches around an anchoring tonal centre, a note in which the music is most stable

Musical Expressionism- Music that features increased dissonance, contrast of dynamics and distorted melodies

Avant-Garde- Music that is considered to be at the 'forefront' of invention- rejection of the status quo combined with critique of convention

Neoclassicism- Revival of classical values of the classical era. Popular in the interwar period

Serialism- Composing style using a specific arrangement of pitches, rhythm and other musical elements. Pioneered mainly by Schönberg with his 12-tone technique

Micropolyphony- huge static sound masses, often chromatic and dissonant, forming different melodic fragments'

Regietheater- Originating from the 1980s, it allows the creative director freedom of interpretation or devising

Non-Synthesis- describes the use of digital technology that is a substitute for painted scenery or to outline emotive undercurrents- a layer of effect that does not interact directly with the performers.

Partial-Synthesis- the interaction of both live and digital elements form the scenography and require the other to function

Full- Synthesis- Complete dominance of the digital over physical- the production cannot exist without the presence of the digital

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