Opera in Modern Society

Global Connections Research Proposal

By Emily King

Table of Contents:

1. Introduction
2. Literature Review
3. Research Design
4. Action
5. Tentative Bibliography

Introduction

Opera is not any easy topic for discussion. Many people can hardly give it an accurate definition. Yet this “foreign” art form has an astounding impact on pop culture and is a far greater influence on society than anyone might dare to guess. It is often shrouded by stereotypes and is easily caricatured. Because opera is has existed for so long (over 400 years) it is sometimes difficult to see how it might still be relevant in the 21st century. Opera is often written off as unapproachable because of its track record for being an elitist art form, and yet this has not been the case for quite some time. Very few people realize how prevalent opera is and has been in society. New operas are being written every year, and every year new ways of making it accessible to the public are being implemented.

Literature Review

This article by Stephen Holden, taps the surface of the creative process behind John Adams opera *Doctor Atomic*. The opera itself is an artistic representation of the last 48 hours that preceded the first detonation of the atomic bomb. Physicists Freeman Dyson is quoted saying that science and art express the same urge to “take the watch apart to see how it works”. This twentieth century opera, in many respects, does just that in regards to both the music and poetry.[[1]](#endnote-1)

This brief biography of Carlyle Floyd is a feature of the Arizona Opera company’s web-site. It focuses on the achievement that Floyd has attained in the operatic world and how he is recognized as the official initiator of “American Opera”. His opera Susannah is the most widely performed American opera in the world with over eight-hundred productions thus far. The plot satirizes the overzealous anti-communistic sentiments of McCarthyism. [[2]](#endnote-2)

This is a sample chapter from a book (title unknown) by John Storey. It explores modern society’s irrational phobia of opera and how that came to be. He gives a realistic depiction of opera’s role in the modern culture, and then he relays a brief history of opera, after which he continues in showing how opera is an ever-changing art form capable of adapting to modern tastes.[[3]](#endnote-3)

This article delves into the dichotomy of “high culture” and “pop culture” as they are currently perceived. It depicts both notions of culture as vague and misleading stereotypes that can help and hinder any form of art that is divided into either category. A brief history of opera is given followed by venues of change that opera has undergone as history and tastes have changed. These outlets come in many forms from changing the setting of an opera to broadcasting operas in cinemas around the world and even creating new films which expand the horizons of the operatic plot.[[4]](#endnote-4)

This essay drives a path through the evolved and evolving world of opera. It divulges into the effects that pop culture has on the changes that have come about in how opera is presented. Through the changes that opera has gone through this essay explains how the majority of past stereotypes no longer apply to the art form, both good and bad.[[5]](#endnote-5)

To be plain and brief this passage is an intricate exploration of opera’s history from is beginnings in 1597 to the beginnings of twentieth century opera. Intermixed between are definitions of the thematic elements that, in turn, define opera; elements such as the aria, leitmotif, verismo, etc.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Where most writings depict the world of cross-over artists (or singers) this articles attempts to make straight and clear the issue of cross-over composers. The “cross-over” is in reference to the gap between opera and musical theater. Many composers have attempted to cross this gap by presenting compositions of what they deem to be the alternate art form; unfortunately this attempt runs afoul and falls terribly short of success. This article explores why it may be that cross-over composers are so discouraged from doing so.[[7]](#endnote-7)

This pamphlet explores the reasoning and the origin of the common stereotypical phrase “it ain’t over till the fat lady sings”. Naturally it comes from the misled idea that all opera singers are of great quantity which in turn may have come about in light of the fact that for a time many opera singers were of great quantity. However, with changing styles and flexibilities of directors and such that stereotypical picture is no longer valid.[[8]](#endnote-8)

This article explores the creations and establishment of opera since the beginning of the twentieth century. It firstly lays out major operas that were composed early in the century along with brief descriptions about their influence in the world of opera. Additionally it spans the greater length of the century. [[9]](#endnote-9)

Listed in this archive is every American opera written and performed from 1845 to 1995. Many of the opera’s listed are taken from plays, novels, folk tales and even history itself and all work to shape to “sound” and “culture” of American opera, setting it apart from opera’s that mat have originated in Italy, Germany, France, Britain, etc.[[10]](#endnote-10)

This article explores the dimensions of opera in America. It notes how the U.S. has more opera houses than Germany and Italy, and how the annual number of attendees is fairly equal to the annual number of people who attend NFL games. It also defines a trend in showing newer and/or more obscure operas. Unlike European houses that draw their majority of funding from the government U.S. houses rely on themselves to raise money for productions. This affects the performances in that, unlike the outlandish productions that can be seen in Europe, American companies are forced to conform to the audience’s tastes.[[11]](#endnote-11)

This piece draws a history of Gershwin’s opera *Porgy and Bess*. It explores the inspiration of the story, reaction of the American public, it’s enormous success in Europe and its influence on society (and vice versa). It records statements made by Gershwin, cast members, critics and opera notables such as James Levine. [[12]](#endnote-12)

This novel explores history from the time of Caesar to Napoleon through an operatic perspective. It is a complete history of every opera that was inspired by events during that period as well as the full extent of the actual events. In particular, this chapter observes the event that led to, propelled and defined the French Revolution and how the chain of events was a cycle of life influencing art which influenced life which influenced art. [[13]](#endnote-13)

This book is a complete history of opera. It relates the full beginnings of the art form to its transition into the 20th century. This book explores the many forms of opera as well as its development through different cultures. It gives a full definition of what opera truly is and how it has been perceived through the ages.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Research Design

I intend to illuminate the extent to which opera permeates pop culture. To achieve this I will first give definition to opera and is evolution through history. I will present the American involvement in the art form and how it compares to other, more familiar art forms such as musical theater. I will also discuss the reasoning behind the general evasive attitude that the populous has toward opera and the ignorance of its impact on American culture. In addition I will shed light on the origins of stereotypes that are associated with opera such has “persons of size” and “Vikings”. Finally, I intend to correct the false assumption that opera is solely a high class art.

Action

To round out my research I plan to do an internship with the Virginia Opera Company for their production of Hansel and Gretel. This will involve participating in the chorus and performing with the company in Norfolk, Richmond and Fairfax. The internship relates to my research in that it is a modernized production set in West Virginia and sun gin English. In addition to the internship I plan to host an event to display to my peers and neighbors the truth about what opera is and how prevalent it is in pop-culture. For this event I plan to do a presentation on opera, to provide information about the subject, and interspersed throughout the evening I will provide demonstrations of opera with the help of Governor’s School students.

Tentative Bibliography

1. Holden, Stephen. *Mixing Art and Science to Get Doomsday*, *nytimes.com,* 30 May 2008, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2008/05/30/movies/30wond.html?ref=petersellars> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Carlyle Floyd, Arizona Opera: Learn about Opera,* 1999,

   <http://www.evermore.com/azo/c_bios/floyd.php3> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Storey, John. “*Expecting Rain”: Opera as Popular Culture?*. <http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/content/BPL_Images/Content_store/Sample_chapter/0631222103%5C001.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Toutant, Ligia. *Can Stage Directors Make Opera and Popular Culture ‘Equal’?, Media-Cultue.org.au,* 2008.<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewArticle/34> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. vStephens, Page. *Popera: The Effect of Pop Culture on Opera, AssociatedContent.org,* 2 June 2008 <http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/783649/popera_the_effect_of_pop_culture_on.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Dorak, M. Tevfik. *Evolution of Opera,* 6 June 2006, <http://www.dorak.info/music/opera.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Tommasini, Anthony. *Opera? Musical? Please Respect the Difference, NYTimes.com,*7July 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/10/theater/musical-or-opera-the-fine-line-that-divides-them.html?pagewanted=all> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Kessel, Richard E. “The Opera Stereotype” Choral Director October/November 2007 <http://www.jdaddario.com/resources/content/tlr/pdf/VOED_PM_TheOperaStereotype.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Unkown. Opera in the twentieth century – Part One – 1901 - 1939 <http://homepage.mac.com/wmcfar/20th%20Century%20Opera.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Hapka, Christopher. *Timeline of American opera since 1845*. 2007 <http://www.usopera.com/faq/timeline.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Leaf, Jonathan. “America’s Opera Boom”, *The American: The Journal of the American Enterprise Institute*, July/August 2007. <http://www.american.com/archive/2007/july-august-magazine-contents/america2019s-opera-boom> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Standifer, James. “The Complicated Life of Porgy and Bess”, *Humanities*, November/December 1997, Volume 18/Number 6 <http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/1997-11/porgy.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Jellinek, George. *History Through the Opera Glass: From the Rise of Caesar to the Fall of Napoleon.* White Plains, NY Proscenium Publishers Inc. 1994. Print [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Somerset-Ward, Richard. *The Story of Opera.* Harry N Abrams, Incorporated New York, NY. 1998. Print. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)