



Héctor J. Pérez (ed)

OPERA AND VIDEO

TECHNOLOGY AND SPECTATORSHIP

Peter Lang

The contributions in this volume reflect the efforts of musicology to understand a hybrid area with a fascinating evolution. They aim to address the relationship between opera and audiovisual technology from its origins to today by offering the results of a balanced critical and innovative approach. The reader interested in opera, aesthetics, narrative or transmediality will find concrete approaches devoted to an unexplored diversity of aspects with an impact on the narrative conditions in which we watch opera on screen. The variety of perspectives shows how original methodological approaches are able to design a new map of the main transmedial problems of opera in TV, DVD and even in phonography. The book offers not only isolated theoretical contributions but seeks a connection of them with significant practice oriented approaches coming from the fields of video direction and composition.

Héctor J. Pérez is Associate Professor of Audiovisual Communication and Aesthetics and a member of the Technology and Information Research Team, CALSI, at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia. Among his main publications on Opera are “Shakespeare jenseits des Dramas” (1998); *El Nacimiento de la tragedia. Un ensayo sobre la metafísica del artista en el joven Nietzsche* (2001); “Opera Narratives: From Mythology to Audiovisual Aesthetics” (2006); *Expression in the Performing Arts* (ed with Inmaculada Álvarez and Francisca Pérez-Carreño, 2010); “Una estética audiovisual de Electra” (2010).

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Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Oxford · Wien

Bibliographic information published by die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <<http://dnb.d-nb.de>>.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data: A catalogue record for this book is available from The British Library, Great Britain

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Opera and video: technology and spectatorship / [edited by] Héctor Julio Pérez. – 1st ed. p. cm.

ISBN 978-3-0343-0542-6

1. Opera. 2. Video recording. 3. Motion pictures. 4. Television. I. Julio Pérez, Héctor
ML1700.O647 2012

791.45'6–dc23

2011050191

Cover illustration: © J. Dugo, GRAMMA (J. M. Sánchez-Verdú),
Berlin (Zeitgenössische Oper Berlin und Deutsche Oper Berlin, 2006)

Cover design: Didier Studer, Peter Lang AG

ISBN 978-3-0343-0542-6 ~~E ISBN 978 3 0351 0347 2~~

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Hochfeldstrasse 32, CH-3012 Bern, Switzerland

info@peterlang.com, www.peterlang.com

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Printed in Switzerland

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Introduction

HÉCTOR J. PÉREZ

Since the nineties, audiovisual technology has been a threat to the mystique surrounding live opera as an aesthetic experience that is unique to the genre. Many spectators have been watching opera on screen for years and, in most cases, this experience is not exclusive but may actually encourage attendance at live opera. In late 2011, with the economic crisis at its most destructive peak, very few theatres have managed to keep their budgets intact. In Spain, the country whence I write, there has been a considerable decline in public funding for most of the country's theatres, as in many other places. However, the fragile economic context does not seem to have paralyzed certain technological practices that have become widespread over the last decade in opera theatres worldwide. Audiovisual productions of main titles have not decreased significantly. It seems that the crisis is not seriously affecting technology projects of major opera theatres. What reason lies behind this?

I think we may well be looking at a second trajectory in the impact of digital technology on opera. The experiences that have transformed opera fans into digital consumers bring us closer to the paradigm of cultural convergence. A spectator used to watching opera on TV is now fast approaching the stage of watching it on a computer, perhaps on a big screen at home, or on a tablet PC equipped with excellent headphones. Convergence has knocked on opera's door, and the answer can be experienced in what is on offer at several theatres. In 2011, the *Teatro Real* in Madrid launched a digital box, which allows us to watch live or to record a significant number of their productions. Over the last two years, the MET has increased several services based on the use of the Internet as a distribution platform. The best-known is MET HD, which distributes live productions in high digital quality to many cinemas around the world. The Met Player

service is also a remarkable initiative, by which means the institution makes available to Internet users around the world (with very few geographical restrictions) its private catalogue of recorded productions, many with a choice of subtitles and at truly affordable prices.

With the development of convergence, live experience at opera theatre increases possible alternatives. Convergence is not about the adoption of one type of device but rather the inclusion of many types of experiences within a device, which today can be a smart TV, game console, computer, smart phone or tablet. That convergence should give rise to the possibility of a new experience of digital content is one of the chief attractions of technological development. Watching opera on screen no longer means being in the living-room; it can take place on a train, in a park, at an airport, or while in a hospital waiting room. These are all opportunities resulting from technological developments, and it seems that the initial barrier that identified a type of art with a kind of experience in very specific conditions has definitely been broken. Theatres themselves not only broadcast live opera in very suitable spaces, such as cinemas, but also in squares and parks, and even after hours. In many cases, the latter type of experiences consists of promotional acts by theatres trying to expand their influence and to bring new spectators to the house. There is no doubt that the breakdown of barriers implied by the second wave of technology convergence causes not only the variety of watching experiences to proliferate but also the scope of potential recipients. Not only do those who attend in parks and squares do so for free, but those who now enjoy opera streamed via Internet do so at a reasonable price. Unlike other major cultural areas, where convergence is blocked by certain prejudices, above all in Europe, opera seems to be making good use of this opportunity in positive ways.

But the relationship between opera and communication technologies is much older than the recent developments we have raised. Some important contributions in this volume are concerned with phenomena that require a historical perspective on the relationship between spectators and technologies. It all reflects the efforts of musicology to understand a hybrid area whose main attraction is that it offers numerous aspects that have yet to be explored as objects of study. This volume aims to address this challenge by offering a balance between cultural

and aesthetic issues that have emerged in the history of the relationship between opera and audiovisual technology from its origins to today.

Gabriela Cruz proposes in “The Fairy Tale of *Bel Canto*: Walt Disney, Theodor Adorno, Kurt Weill Play the Gramophone” a perspective of a significant continuity between the beginning of the phonograph and the digital age. Both historical contexts are dominated by technologies producing aesthetic qualities with the aim of exceeding the qualities of reality. This is the basis of her extraordinarily fruitful analysis of Cinderella’s song, “Oh Sing Sweet Nightingale”, from Walt Disney’s eponymous animated feature (1950). Cruz’s main hypothesis on that song as a new form of aural plenitude is contrasted with a critical reading of the phonographic golden age of opera. She does it through a dialogue with the most relevant thoughts on that topic by Theodor Adorno, such as the contemplation of song as acoustic enigma. Cruz offers the case of the phonogram-scene “*Tango Angèle*” from Kurt Weill’s *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren* (1928) as a second phase of her approach. What does the gramophone deliver to opera and to its stage? The question addressed requires several pages for showing the difficulties of the scene as a theatrical/critical proof of Adorno’s phonographic theory and several more to explore the complexities of a Benjaminian allegory of song.

The second contribution to the relationship between opera and technology also adopts an historical perspective in “Opera on Italian television: The first thirty years, 1954-1984”. However, instead of a traditional view of the story of Opera in Italian Television, Senici focuses on some especially-revealing moments. He departs from a fragment of a letter by Lucchino Visconti, where he shows his amazing ability to understand the problems of television. These comments provide the opportunity to convert historical perspective into a specific analysis on a transmedial problem: “the gap between represented time and performance time”. But this question leads to the core of the problem Senici thematizes, the different modalities of tensions between opera and television. The first one considers the conflict between realism and theatricality in television opera. Senici’s diagnosis shows the existence of a problem emerging in several aspects of the analyzed broadcasts, such as the prevailing types of shot and camera

movements. The second one, regarding the first live opera broadcast in colour in Italy, which took place on 7th December 1976 with Verdi's *Otello*, also reveals a tension between the aesthetics of television and theatre although this was at a time that represented an important evolution in the language of television compared to the fifties. The last one, the broadcast on 25th August 1984 of the fourth performance of *Il viaggio a Reims* in Luca Ronconi's stage direction, shows a television spectacularization of theatrical reality quite close to the main reference of the TV spectacles of the eighties, Prince Charles and Diana's wedding. Senici invites comparison of the results of those analyses with a general assessment of the subsequent developments TV has experienced, characterized today by its evolution within cultural convergence.

In this volume the reader will also find musicological research for a better understanding of aspects relevant to the aesthetic experience. How does the filming of an opera change our perception of temporality? Delphine Vincent's "*Temps spatialisé: opera relays and the sense of temporality*" is devoted to one of the most general issues related to the change in the way we watch opera as film. She describes the limited status of the linear progressive temporality of opera, compared with the richness of temporal modalities of cinema. This is an interesting path to connect some important intermedial questions. For example, opera uses cinematic effects but, when it is itself shot, it is no longer able to account for them properly. Thus, the core of the contribution is an analysis of the temporal structure of the alternation between kinetic movements (*scena*, *tempo d'attacco*, *tempo di mezzo*) and static movements (*adagio*, *cabaletta*) in the Italian romantic operatic conventions. This is an unconventional approach because the narrative properties of musical structures usually remain ignored, though they are always implying different kinds of conditions for the final narrative results of filmed opera. Vincent's *découpages* of Giuseppe Verdi's passage lead us to evaluate the ways the visual narrative aspects are imposed on the musical structures, dictating a problematic new perceptual field of temporality.

Is the overture part of the opera? What happens when we sit in front of a screen during the overture? These two questions are indicative of the orientation Gaia Varon raises in "Screen Overtures". She

analyzes different possible cases, such as the use of the overture as title music, films that show the complete performance of the overture, others in which the sound approaches the role of music in silent films and the existence of a case in which the effectiveness of the relationship between music and image has special value for the rest of audio-visual production. Varon's perspective also shows that the subtlety of the relationship between music and image can be diagnosed as early as the overture, even deeply enough to analyze the results of synchrony between music and credits. Thus, all the pages devoted to Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's productions show the overture as an authentic example of excellence reached in coherence with the whole narrative of the work. In other cases, as in the study of Paul Czinner's production, the value of this section may be oriented to emotional factors external to the opera, creating an aura around the legendary figure of W. Furtwängler. Varon concludes her contribution with a systematic proposal to express the most widespread forms of the narrative relationship between music and image in overture: Background music, Film music, Programme music and (Absolute) Symphonic music performance.

Jaume Radigales addresses one of the core dichotomies of the relationship between film and opera. The problem of synchronization goes beyond immediate aesthetic effect. It serves as a sign for detecting whether cinema is going to be close to opera or vice-versa. As we know, opera production following film criteria, with strict dubbing and singers replaced by actors, is an extreme case and is not always convincing. The reverse hypothesis, in which opera shares some characteristics with documentary, does not seem to be a fruitful one. Radigales takes into account these extremes and goes deeper into two operas with almost classic status in audiovisual format, Joseph Losey's *Don Giovanni* and Hans Jürgen Syberberg's *Parsifal*. Each case shows a different alternative formal proposal that proves how flexibility in the relationship between artistic languages becomes a way of enhancing artistic production. Radigales's approach is very interesting, not only because it offers a relevant perspective for film opera but also because it is useful for discussion of most popular formats, such as the filming of live opera performances.

Áine Sheil's essay "The opera director's voice: DVD 'extras' and the question of authority" focuses on one type of bonus feature included in many opera DVD 'extras': interviews with, and commentaries, by stage directors. She explores how these can provide valuable perspectives on the interpretative strategies behind the productions in question, as well as how they may inevitably guide reception and interpretation of the main features. The case studies are Calixto Bieito's commentary on his production of *Wozzeck* at the *Gran Teatre del Liceu*, Barcelona, and an interview with Peter Brook on his production of *Don Giovanni* at the Aix-en-Provence Festival. Bieito's commentary on his own provocative style of direction is analyzed critically in his dependence on the so-called 'work concept'. Brook's fifteen-minute commentary reveals not only paradoxical aspects, as in Bieito's case, but also the way he subverts normal opera practice with his authority. Sheil's perspectives follow different paths (Bordieu's statements on cultural production, Philip Auslander on economic implications, and R. Taruskin and others on the question of authorship) before suggesting that the commentaries ultimately serve to stabilize and fix the traditional values of the artistic field of opera.

The book concludes with two special contributions, the first one is a transcription of a conversation with Pietro d'Agostino during the seminar at the outset of several of the papers collected here. D'Agostino is video director at the *Gran Teatre del Liceu* and was so kind as to share a few days of reflection with us and offer his professional experience in an open dialogue with several of the speakers at the seminar. Finally, we thought it would also be of great interest to include reflections on his own creation by the Spanish composer José María Sánchez Verdú. He has written an excellent contribution explaining some creative keys in his *Libro de las estancias*, which has been a complementary perspective to our discussion as it involves a unique approach to technology, more determined by poetic and cultural decisions than by prevailing fashions or trends. His proposal, through the richness and coherence of his artwork, may reflect the open and critical perspective on the relationship between technology and art that this book would wish to promote.

The Fairy Tale of Bel Canto: Walt Disney, Theodor Adorno, Kurt Weill Play the Gramophone

GABRIELA CRUZ

This essay explores bel canto (re)formed by phonography and addresses lyrical apotheosis as an effect of the materialities of recording, transmission, and reproduction.¹ Bel canto is understood here as a form of lyrical beauty somewhat unhinged from operatic history, as an ideal of song and of singing implicated with a modern poetics of wonder. Fin-de-siècle inventors and fabulists first conceived of the promise of reproduction – the historical and technical domain of recorded sound – as one of enchantment, formed in magical intercourse with the inhuman.² They thus inaugurated an influential line of discourse about recorded song, one echoed most recently in Christopher Morris’ discussion of lyrical song in the digital age as a hybrid form, an expressive moment forged in the encounter with the radical otherness of technical mediation, grounded in the pleasures of “dispersion, distribution, and blurred boundaries” or, as Morris puts it, “of transmis-

1 An early version of this essay was presented at the International Workshop on Opera and Video, Universidad Politécnica de Valencia/Instituto Valenciano de la Música, held on the 22–23 March 2010. I am grateful to Héctor Perez Lopez, the conference organizer, and to all the conference participants for the generosity of their reactions to the initial paper. Thanks also to Roger Parker, Dana Goo-ley, and Alessandra Campana, who read the later version of the essay, asked important questions, and made crucial suggestions that greatly improved the final version published here.

2 The topic is addressed by Friedrich A. Kittler in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 21–114; and Felicia Miller Frank, *The Mechanical Song: Women, Voice, and the Artificial in Nineteenth-Century French Narrative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 143–71.

sion.”³ Morris’ statement is part of a new critical argument for opera that positions the genre beyond the premise of liveness, accepting technological re-mediation as essential to lyrical fruition today.⁴ While recognizing the importance of Morris’ view, my purpose here is both less celebratory and essentially retrospective: to reflect on the movements of technical invention and critical injunction that have impelled the historical dominance of transmission in lyrical culture, contemplating the wish-images of phonographic utopia in parallel with the cost they have entailed.

Song understood as a form of transmission belongs to the history of creative commerce between people and things, a domain that brings the notion of musical agency under new scrutiny. Writing exclusively from a technosonic perspective, and addressing the mass media phenomenon of the posthumous duet, Jason Stanyet and Benjamin Piekut have recently re-defined agency as a diffuse form of collaboration, which “transpires along differential axes of access, emplacement, privilege, capacity, and responsibility.”⁵ They inscribe song in a history of human accommodation to technology, one that shuns old anxieties about the self-bounded nature of the human subject. Their statement elicits, of course, a re-examination of established philosophical precepts on voice and song as expressive of an essential subjectivity, a topic I pursue below. I call attention to the technical and scientific history that sustains current understandings of the singing voice, noting that modern discourse on the subjective powers of song is largely grounded on habits of listening and sonic pleasures forged within the sensorial experience of modern media. Lyrical song in transmission characteristically devolves a grandiose dream horizon. Operatic song, crystallized in the age of reproduction as a restricted economy of beautiful singing drawn from a canonical repertory of past greatness, obsessively recorded and staged, trades on illusions of

3 Christopher Morris, “Digital Diva: Opera on Video”, *Opera Quarterly* 26/1 (2010), 96–119; 114–15.

4 Liveness designates not just the condition of live performance but also its cultural status. The word is coined by Phillip Auslander in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

5 Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut, “Deadness Technologies of the Intermundane”, *The Drama Review* 54/1 (2010), 14–38: 33.

dematerialization – of timelessness, genesis, perfection and plenitude. Even the operatic voice, an object that remains powerfully symbolic of the experience of immediacy – of being “in touch” – is commonly encircled by critical discourses that celebrate various forms of dispersal, flight, and removal.

Below, I explore the dream-force of song, as it emerges from phonographic practice. I consider it in light of Benjamin’s “dialectical image,” contemplating the utopian projection and the sedimented past that constitute it in two apparently irreconcilable scenes of lyrical transmission and reproduction. One scene, issuing from the technical apparatus, is Cinderella’s song, “Oh Sing Sweet Nightingale,” from Walt Disney’s eponymous animated feature (1950), offered as a modern dream-image of bel canto. The other, conceived for the live stage of opera, is the phonogram-scene “Tango Angèle” from Kurt Weill *Der Zar läßt sich photographieren* (1928). It presents lyrical beauty as an object arising from the collaboration between a singer and a gramophone. Together, the two scenes chart a significant territory of cultural production (popular and conservative vs. erudite and avant-garde), of media and genre (film/reproduced art vs. opera/performative art), of musical style (tonal vs. atonal grammars), and of taste. Yet, important affinities bind these two scenes of bel canto. Both imagine song as a form of intercourse between a singer and a machine. In both, lyrical beauty appears in the guise of a wish, a lyrical trace exceeding the singularities of the phonographic operation. Both offer this trace as an element that registers a captivating surplus to be experienced in a standstill. The trace intersects past and present, petrified recording and transitory being. Finally, and so far unremarked, but crucial to my argument below, these chosen instances call for a form of retrospective contemplation that brings into a new aesthetic and critical focus the relevance of Baroque magic to modern experience. Thus, Cinderella absorbs the fairy-tale motif of the magical shoe, and *Der Zar* brings to presence a form of seraphic divinity. The two figures are offered in film and in opera as portals to enchantment, bringing into modern consciousness a long-repressed memory of an otherness made to sound beneath and in-between known and familiar objects. This otherness is the surfeit – the valuable node of experience lost to the rationalities of technosonic effectiveness – that this essay aims to sal-

vage and restore to a new critical understanding of song in transmission.

The Perfect Fit

Cinderella's shoe recalls sartorial pleasures. More broadly, it evokes the notion of the perfect fit, a utopian accord between human desire and matter that is central to baroque magic and remains so to our media age. In the fairy tale collected by Giambattista Basile and published posthumously in his *Pentamerone* (1634–1636), we are told that “as soon as ever [the shoe] approaches Zezolla's foot, it darts on to it of its own accord, the way iron flies to the magnet.”⁶ In Perrault's better-known version included in *Ma Mère L'Oye* of 1697, a glass slipper melds to the foot like wax. Later, in German lands, the wonders performed by the shoe take on a gruesome patina. In Grimm's *Aschenputtel*, the shoe retains a mineral inflexibility and hardness, but is now made of gold. Each of the two stepsisters fits it to her foot by means of ghastly self-mutilation – the elder cuts off her toe and the younger cuts off her heel. Only Aschenputtel fills the shoe without violence. The topos of the shoe is that of manifest power, ignored altogether by nineteenth-century theatrical versions of the tale, including Charles G. Étienne's and Nicolo Isouard's *Cendrillon* (1810) and Jacopo Ferretti's and Gioachino Rossini's *La Cenerentola* (1817).⁷ In earlier versions of the tale, however, Cinderella's slipper, an object of fashion, acts like a magnet seeking and finding its complementary charge in moral beauty. It darts about, and attaches itself and melds to only one foot, rejecting all others. Its miraculous behavior demonstrates the magic of the perfect fit, emphasizing the characteristics of

6 Alan Dundes, *Cinderella: A Casebook* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 10.

7 Paolo Fabbri, “Librettos and Librettists”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Rossini*, ed. Emanuele Senici (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 51–67: 59.

adherence, envelopment, and repetition. All this fabulous surplus, lost to nineteenth-century audiences, is what Walt Disney's film version of the tale restores to our modernity, along with a new American vision of female virtue.

The perfect fit is the pleasure celebrated in Disney's *Cinderella*. Disney restores Perrault's shoe, producing a glass slipper unmistakable in its late-1940s chic and highlighted by playful manipulation – in the film, Cinderella's elegant foot keeps slipping out of all footwear. Yet, as a way of distinguishing goodness, the shoe remains a comic after-thought.⁸ Disney added a musical scene to the fairy tale, introducing song as a new site of moral and aesthetic judgement.⁹ The moment is fashioned by means of contrasting scenes. A shot shows the music room of Cinderella's household. The camera settles on the two stepsisters and their mother occupied in music-making. It travels towards them. One sister sings; the other plays the flute, accompanied by the mother at the piano.¹⁰ The two girls, drawn as hapless creatures, produce a horrid performance of the song, "Oh Sing Sweet Nightingale," witnessed by Lucifer the cat, the resident listener. The song is delivered in a nasal singing voice with flat intonation, wrong notes conveyed by a tinny flute sound and a depth-less voice characteristic of music heard at a relative distance. Lucifer listens a bit and then, repelled by the performance, retreats from the room. The cat closes the door behind him and shrugs off the bad performance.

As the door closes, there is a split second of silence, followed by a rendition of the same song by Cinderella. Poor Cinderella, too humble for music lessons and accompanying instruments, sings alone as she scrubs the floors of the mansion's palatial entrance, one floor down. But her rendition is given an extraordinary musical and acoustic eminence. Her performance, as noted by *Billboard* magazine in December

8 On Cinderella and American morality, see Naomi Wood, "Domesticating Dreams in Walt Disney's *Cinderella*", *The Lion and the Unicorn* 20/ 1 (1996), 25–49.

9 The reasons behind the controversy were financial. The complexity of the song scene made it expensive to produce. See Susan Ohmer, "'That Rags to Riches Stuff': Disney's *Cinderella* and the Cultural Space of Animation", *Film History* 5/ 2 (1993), 239–49: 224.

10 The scene is available here: <http://vimeo.com/32465063>