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About the old and the new

In this online publication, we try - not always successfully - to avoid a polarising duality between the old and the new. In this duality, the old would stand for traditional, conservative, repertoire etc., and the new would be contemporary, new creations, innovative etc. In the vital and extremely diverse opera practice in Europe, this duality just does not exist as a split screen. The bulk of the opera houses produce a wide variety of stagings of repertoire, sometimes referring to a traditional approach, and sometimes wildly innovative and most of the times something in between. Quite a lot of even the biggest houses have yearly world creations of new operas.

In short, the art of opera is in reality a very fuzzy and diverse mixture of tradition and innovation. And that's exactly why it remains a vivid art. In practice, nobody gains in a non-existing fight between the old and the new. All operas are (re)created differently, applying a wide variety of techniques and artistic approaches. Most of them are performed in opera houses ranging from historic to high-tech futuristic constructions, and everything in between. Some of them are performed in new spaces: outside on a lake, or inside industrial leftovers. New contemporary creations can involve dj's and rappers and electronic instruments and amplified voices, and some of them are written for baroque instruments. Some of them involve the active participation of the public, and some are in their concept barely distinguishable from a classic tradition of centuries ago.

It would be weird and quite counterproductive if education would hang on to a split screen approach towards the old and the new. Almost every future opera singer will have encounters with a wide range of practices ranging from the very old to the very new. Opera education should not try to protect future singers from the future. As today's practice proves, the future will embrace both tradition and innovation, often within the same house and even the same production. It is - frankly - part of the job.

In our working group involving opera educators and artists from the conservatories of Porto (Portugal), Vilnius (Lithuania) and Maastricht (the Netherlands), we had - in the margin of our Intensive Study Programs - long and sometimes heated discussions about the old and the new. We all strived for the incorporation of 'the New' in education. And we discovered big geographic differences in how 'mainstream' opera was perceived. In the end, this working group tried to construct an educational path to incorporate 'the new' in the education of an opera practice with a huge tradition.

Our recommendations try to stimulate the evolution of opera in all its diversity, through education.

Recommendation I

Approach innovation as part of a long tradition of renewal within opera

Opera sometimes feels as one of those last surviving 'high-arts'. It's expensive, it attracts an older audience, it plays centuries old pieces, its houses used to be covered in gold and red velvet. In this framing, it's widely considered as a doomed art from a lost era, with a dying audience.

(One wonders what's wrong with an older audience? Hip-hop concerts and rave parties are rarely blamed for their young audiences...)

In this context, it's easy to ignore that opera has always been (and still is) an innovative art, incorporating the latest technologies and trends of its neighbouring art practices. From the revolutionary acoustics of the Bayreuth orchestra pit to the video set and subtitles of nowadays performances, it renews its technology. With every bespoke staging of a (repertoire or contemporary) composition by contemporary singers, conductor, stage designer and director, it renews and expands its artistic language.

In contrast to popular belief, opera is not oblivious for cultural and social changes. Neither should opera education be. As the frontrunners of new opera practices, educators should acquaint themselves and their students with all the new techniques and trends within the real, live opera world. The rich opera tradition can only be kept alive by continually reinventing its artistic practice. That doesn't exclude traditional approaches: it builds on them. It expands the range of possibilities.

• Teaching new, contemporary acting skills for all opera students

As people on the streets change through times, they change on stage too. Acting is a skill which evolves alongside societal changes. A whole range of acting styles can be asked for in both repertoire and contemporary operas. Often, these acting styles are imported from contemporary theatre or cinema. When the familiarity of the public with the characters on stage is asked for, a film-style, more subtle, lowkey acting style can be required, especially when live video close ups are projected on stage. In abstract stagings (think of Achim Freyer or Robert Wilson), a very formally encoded acting style could be asked for.

In the EOALAB research we encountered different acting methodologies. At the ISP organised by Porto, the American singer Claron McFadden talked enthusiastically about the 'SWARM' method where she teaches how to separate the singing from the rest of the physicality of the body. Even when impersonating a Pretzl, one should be able to sing the aria.

This 'new acting of the voice', proposed in the context of this workshop, will enable the singers and performers to better connect themselves with their bodies and with the others, with their voices and emotions, as well as it will bring them a better understanding of what should be the meaning and the act of making new opera, today.

*António Salgado on the Vox Ludos Workshop in
"Singing and the Expression of Emotion"
A Research on the Performative Process of Opera Making"*

All these methodologies require training: an aspiring opera singer should encounter the same body trainings and improvisation courses, regular actors do. Preferably on an almost daily basis. In today's opera performances, the acting qualities of the singers are more scrutinised than ever. Where an extremely solid singing technique is a sine qua non, the acting capabilities (and the emotional generosity, and the believability of the performance) are the qualities that could be the deciding factor at castings nowadays.

Some of the participants said it would be great to have some "bodywork" every day at the start of the day.

A reaction on the Vox Ludos Workshops at the Maastricht and Vilnius ISPs

This innovation challenges the dramatic qualities of the singers: more and more stage directors ask (sometimes quite unknowingly) a 'natural feeling' and 'honest' acting style which can be extremely challenging while singing at full strength. The exaggerating acting style of the past is less in demand. So at least, young singers should be acquainted with very different acting styles and strategies. Ranging from film style natural acting, over dramatic and larger than life acting, till more coded and abstract forms of acting (Robert Wilson). In all these different styles, singers should realise that the public is understanding every sentence of the plot. More than ever, one can't get away with playing the general idea of the scene. As a singer, one has to engage dramatically with the subtext of every sentence, every word.

Peter Missotten (technologydrivenart.org ZUYD)

Opera as an Intermedial Art

• Familiarising educators and students alike with new technologies involved in contemporary stagings

With 'new technologies in opera' educators tend to refer immediately to the fancy stuff: virtual sets, live projections of the singers etc. Most of these technologies seem out of reach - or too far-fetched - for the opera training in a regular Higher Opera education Institute (HEI). But more obvious technologies which are used in almost every opera production nowadays, such as a live video feed from the conductor, are often overlooked. Standing mid-stage facing the conductor in the pit throughout the aria, is not an option anymore, even in the most traditional performances. Getting used to trust the video feed of the conductor needs trying too. It enhances the acting possibilities of the singers dramatically - literally.

This practice - providing a few live feeds of the conductor on different screens - should be standard in all opera training. And it is not extremely expensive or very hard to achieve. It could be the first step towards building trust on the technologies that are used regularly on all opera stages.

Amplification in opera productions is too often considered as a form of cheating: 'That is no longer traditional opera'. But live streamings - or recordings - of opera performances are no longer the odd one out. And the opera houses of today more often than not don't have the acoustics of centuries ago. The sets are no longer build as acoustic megaphones, the orchestra is bigger, the instruments more powerful... It is actually very rare to see an opera performed exactly as it was at its creation. Even a traditional staging is not traditional at all. We tend to have eradicated the acoustic technologies of centuries ago and have replaced them by louder - sometimes set the border of screaming - singers. By not replacing the old technologies by the new, we actually could have lost the qualities (subtlety, range of expression) of the past.

Although most of us would prefer rightfully the purity un-amplified sound, amplification can also be seen as an extra artistic possibility in the bag of the singer. It allows for new vocal techniques, new expressions, a new reach to a public far away in the open air... That is, if the

singer has been trained for it. For opera education, there are big opportunities here for all future opera singers. Nowadays, it no longer costs an arm and a leg to provide a decent wireless amplification system to the students, if it was only to be able to explore the possibilities and to experiment with new vocal techniques adapted to amplification.

• **Stimulating student driven experiments with new opera formats on new media**

The young student is the best ally for Higher Opera Education Institutes to introduce the experimentation with new opera formats. They are the digitally savvy generation. They are over-familiarised with using new communication technologies. They are glued to screens anyway. Alongside a well needed introduction into the very analogue world of singing, educators should stimulate the student's expertise in new media to experiment with new opera formats, for both repertoires as contemporary stagings. It could empower the student to take control over the possible futures of opera.

Here again, it's by no means a replacement or a threat to the physical vocal training. It is a - actually rather cheap - way to empower the students in their future career. For the Higher Opera Education Institute, it is a way to incorporate and embrace new expertise in the ever-evolving contemporary opera practices.

The music reality which underpins the classical musical education differs greatly from the contemporary situation. The differences are apparent in the musical expression, not only in the great variety of styles and genres, but also in the variety of conceptual approaches, technologies and forms of production. Hence, a wider range of musical specialisations are required in the creation and production of music theatre. Composers, singers, instrumentalists, directors, actors, visual artists and computer programmers need to be primed with a thorough understanding of current and innovative practices.

*Vykintas Baltakas (LMTA Vilnius) in
New musical reality and contemporary education*

