



LIVE MOVIES

A Field Guide to New Media For the Performing Arts

edited by

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Documenting Multimedia Performance Studio's New Stage Technology Project



DAVE SOLDIER

NOTES FROM UNDER THE FLOORBOARDS

Who's Nuts?

Anyone who writes, produces, designs, or directs new opera is *nuts*. The potential of an emotionally and musically overwhelming work entering any repertoire is tiny. Nearly all new work (the English word for opera) is doomed to derision by opera lovers (please don't misunderstand, I like crazy bands of eccentrics!) — a teeny fraction of music fans devoted to museum pieces who don't need or want anything different. The mutually exclusive audience for novel ideas in music, another band of honorable eccentrics, generally won't sit still for opera's length or affectations. If *Tosca* (or the *Magic Flute* or *Lulu*) were created today, note-for-note identical to the original, she would have as little chance of repeat performances as would Jimi Hendrix, if he appeared today, of receiving a major record deal.

Beyond active disregard / automatic animosity from fans, there are inherent frustrations that have bedeviled opera creation since 1603, when the Camerata of Florence assumed the legacy of Athenian theater, both Apollonian or Dionysian, by using all of the devices that singing, playing, acting, storytelling, and stagecraft had to offer. More manifestos by Wagner and Harry Partch, and the Beijing Opera tradition, demand the same access to all the arts to produce an overwhelming experience.

These factors cause a set of immediate production problems: How can one use singing actors and not be embarrassing? How can lyrics be understood when screamed over an orchestra? Where are those capable singers, how can we teach them the music, and how can we afford them? How can you ever afford an orchestra with all the instruments you need, even if for only a single full rehearsal (usually the case)? How do you

incorporate the story and musical style with the set and production people and, often more daunting, a house staff that is often unhelpful and even resentful? Then how do you develop a pretty large audience to justify all that effort?

There are occasional strategies that attack these problems successfully even in the Grand Ol' Opera manner. Here are a couple of examples I witnessed in New York City. The Metropolitan Opera produced John Corigliano's *Ghosts at Versailles* (1991), in which he figured out how to admit with his discomfort with the tradition — Corigliano once told me that he didn't like opera — by satirizing arias and creating a Marx Brothers plot device so that singing in full operatic voice would not be an affectation. It was funny, particularly Marilyn Horne's belly dancer role, moving, beautifully orchestrated, and not much of a critical success, as predicted from the *Tosca* hypothesis. It moreover required specialty voices and expansive stagecraft, and probably will not become a repertoire piece. The New York City Opera produced Tobias Picker's opera *Emmeline* (1996) woven from *bel canto* tradition, even using the only tried and true operatic plot device, i.e., by the end, leave a heroine either unjustly dead or in such bad shape that she might be better off so.

Such new works, with a story and large orchestra and singers who can project over that orchestra to the back rows of a large theater, are rare and sure to become rarer still. There is no opera labeled as such at, say, the Brooklyn Academy of Music or anywhere else that begins to pay back its costs. A decade ago, the cost of a New York City Opera production was reported to be four million dollars, while the genuine cost for any event at Lincoln Center would require a ticket price of \$500. The price of orchestras, singers, and hordes of production and theater staff, are not coming down and will rise further as the "classical" music world starves. There are only a very few composers, directors, and producers who have determined how to negotiate this, combining a means to cajole support from benefactors in the classical style and the several countries who place tax funds into such projects in the contemporary style. If you can name the exceptions, it proverbially proves the rule.

Yet as surely as the same basic human satisfied by village elders reciting legends of Heracles is now filled by TV scriptwriters with stories of heroes in weekly situation comedies, the desire for major league emotional catharsis with music survives. We've been a resilient species when it comes to filling our psychic wants, and I'm way confident opera creation will survive human cupidity better than will low-lying coastal cities or the majority of uncultivated large animal and plant species.

Says Who?

The most exciting new opera doesn't solve those inherent quandaries but end runs them. Here are examples, none of which can enter any repertoire, but act to stir, excite, move, trouble, knock over, decimate — whatever it is that great musical theater does. They happen to each have found their way via the subject of our book, “new media” — recall the “all devices” manifesto and that this is an ancient approach — to let a thousand flowers bloom.

Film opera. Michel Legrand's *Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964), a magnificent tearjerker entirely in song with a singable motif from start to finish worthy of a post WWII *Carmen*. A fine example to demonstrate that the most universal work is the most particular — not only would you have to replace Catherine Deneuve, but you couldn't recreate the fatalism of the setting and characters who understand the effects of the Algerian war in provincial France.

Or post-facto found film, with Richard Einhorn's *Voices of Light* (1995), using live Early Music singers and orchestra to provide music for Carl Dreyer's silent 1928 film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*.

Animated opera. With frame-by-frame drawing, you can do anything: look at the extensive animation credits to Benoit Charest's *Les Triplettes of Belleville* (2003), another heartrending Francophonic. As for all Anglophone opera after Purcell except *Porgy and Bess* and Partch's work, hardly a word can be understood, but *Triplets* doesn't even make the claim to be parsable.

Or it can be far less labor in animation, c.f. Mark Stamen's *Southpark: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* (1999), with the ultimate Disney “I want” song, Satan's homoerotic longing aria climbing higher and higher and then higher by half-steps. (I'm proud to have pioneered this device in my survey-determined composition, *The People's Choice: The Most Wanted Song and The Most Unwanted Song*, a conceptual collaboration with Komar & Melamid.)

You didn't suspect this was going to be an opera. The most exciting new direction of all: and, behold, an avenue by which mere humans, rather than organizations or the very wealthy, might be able to produce their own work.

In Bob Telson's *The Gospel at Colonus* (1983), the show begins as a gospel concert, and bit by bit, one is in the midst of the story of Oedipus Rex, a favorite of Henry Purcell and Harry Partch. Every word sung in this piece can be comprehended.

In John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (1998), the audience enters a rock club, orders a beer, and listens to Hedwig and her rock band perform, then retell a fable from Plato's *Symposia* (a

favorite of Erik Satie) and plunges us into a glam tragedy where the heroine is either unjustly dead or in such bad shape that she might be better off so.

By the way, what is it about Athens throughout four hundred years of opera?

More opera than you suspect. Not one of the examples above uses a classic opera voice or a musical vocabulary that draws directly from the operatic tradition. But Ira Schiff's late ensemble *La Gran Scena* routinely used a host of drag queen sopranos who sang the repertoire precisely and made vicious fun of every aria and great singer. Shows were accurate excerpts of the most emotional moments from Grand Opera. The internal logic decreed that parsability of the lyrics here would be as much of a mistake as under-acting.

John Moran's operas with the Ridge Theater, for example, *Matthew in the School of Life* (1995), were composed entirely on computer. There were usually no conventional instruments, but rather music made of assembled samples. More startling, there was no singing, but spoken vocals played over a PA system with actors mouthing the words in pantomime as human puppets. Every word is clearly understood, and the excitement of beautiful singing was replaced by the surprise of comparing one's expectations to what would next occur. Laurie Olinder's sets used a combination of simple motifs and projections that, together with the wide-ranging sounds, elicited disorientation rare in the performing arts.

What Are They Saying?

There are singers with voices that sail over the orchestra and are still understood. But even with the examples of *The Ghosts at Versailles* and *Emmeline*, the audience can barely if at all understand the lyrics; in the latter case, a listener in my row asked what language the opera was in.

Let's return to those old Greeks and how they sang their stories. The vocal style of Homeric myths survived unbroken until recently in the islands, and you can hear them on recordings made by Alan Lomax for the Smithsonian. The music is neither an open throated uninflected "early music" sound nor an unmetred Gregorian Chant but a funky repeated riff with a voice that sounds like Howlin' Wolf or James Brown. I don't speak Attic but even I can understand some of the words. No wonder the repertoire lasted more than 4000 years.

The loss of intelligibility is often credited to the composer, and there are obviously composers who place accents in ways that make sung English awkward and would never have lasted a minute with Ira Gershwin.

But more often after the composer can sing the part in a poor yet perfectly comprehensible voice, the song is repeated by a professional singer in round vowels and perfectly clipped consonants that barely resemble any spoken tongue. This manner of singing has become part and parcel of contemporary conservatory training for big voices. Even many of the best enunciators are required to handle a part musically in a language made in part of sounds they cannot produce.

Conservatory voice is not required to produce a big sound: gospel singers possess the other song tradition in the USA where a non-amplified voice can be easily heard and parsed over a big group of instruments. Gospel singers do not typically read music, and a composer working with an orchestra needs to figure out the means to make the combination work: I succeeded in one oratorio for gospel singers and orchestra, *Mark Twain's War Prayer*, in which the parts were easily memorized and in the gospel tradition, but faced a gospel group's revolt in my opera *Naked Revolution*, where I tried to get them to sing outside of the tradition. This problem can in principal be solved by plenty of rehearsal and coaching, but organizing this is nearly impossible for amateurs and out of the question with professionals.

Our new media may come to the rescue in several ways. First, over the past decade, nearly all composers have learned to write or copy out their scores on the computer (I hear a lot of short repeated phrases in recent composed music, fundamentally because it is hard to map out longer ideas on a computer screen), much as nearly all letters are presently written as e-mails. The advantage for us is that it has become trivial to record accurate parts for the singers to memorize. Thus, a gospel singer or any vocalist can learn the music: it should be understood that even many opera singers are poor readers and learn mostly from recordings. It does not, however, address the problem that non-classical singers do not know how to follow a conductor and require experience and explanation to understand how entrances are cued and tempos followed.

Second, and sometimes sadly, there is the microphone. Amplification allowed Bing Crosby and Louis Armstrong and nearly all subsequent pop singers to have a career, and is responsible for the opera voice seeming affected, one that children make fun of in the playground. In truth, the opera voice is no more affected than crooning, but was developed to sail over loud instruments and hit the back of the hall. The invention of the microphone nevertheless allows even non-singers to mumble or hum their voices in new opera.

Whenever possible, I prefer the sound of the unamplified voice to one coming out of speakers. My oratorio, *The Apotheosis of John Brown*, used un-mic'd voices in front of a baroque orchestra, and we performed it at theaters that never otherwise used unamplified music. As I hoped, the

audience had to be quiet and thus became quite absorbed in the story. The same approach did not work with the 10-piece chamber group for my opera *Naked Revolution*, when it became clear that the audience could not follow vocal melodies over a piano, winds, and percussion. Some otherwise outstanding singers cannot be heard with 19th century instruments without amplification, and to exclude them is to limit the range of vocal expression. The blame lies not only with the musicians, but also with audiences that have grown up with music blasted at them through speaker systems during all of their formative musical experiences. They say they can't otherwise "hear" it.

An opera critic for the *New York Times*, Anthony Tomassini, has been a strong critic of vocal amplification in his columns. I heard him lecture on the subject one evening at the Harvard Club, using a microphone to be heard in a room that in previous decades didn't require one.

There is another beneficent side to microphones inevitably to come. Prerecorded voices are already used in opera, and as mentioned, in most of John Moran's work there is no live singing, but a musical arrangement of spoken voice recording, often soundlessly mouthed by live actors. This will lead to more ways to express the voice musically, either prerecorded, or more interestingly, live. It's now possible to so closely trail the genuine rhythms and microtones of the voice that an instantaneous musical accompaniment could follow it precisely. We can do immediately — purely from a technical level — what it took Harry Partch a lifetime to develop.

Who's In The Pit?

Part of the spectacle of opera is the knowledge that the pack of living musicians just outside the staged action is busy cooking up the sound, and it's the part of the experience that I treasure most. But the conventional orchestra is doing its best to commit suicide. The orchestra once had the expansive quality that the opera manifestos wished for, incorporating new instruments as they developed. The Johann Strauss orchestra, playing Viennese dance music, used most of the same sorts of instruments as the Vienna Philharmonic. Yet now, not a single instrument common in American popular music is included in the conventional orchestra. If a composer writes for these instruments, the costs to the orchestra in extra performers, in part due to union regulations that charge extra salary for players of "non-conventional" instruments, effectively disallows their use. As a consequence, the orchestra seems affected to most music lovers, a suitable background for the kid in the playground singing "Figaro, Figaro" with a big opera voice.

Finances also dictate a near impossibility of more than a single rehearsal before performance. In order for this to run smoothly, the

orchestra cannot be given anything that requires deviation from normal practice. For instance, asking an orchestra to play a simple contemporary American pop rhythm invites not only a rhythmic disaster, but ensures that the majority of rehearsal time will be wasted on that section.

I love the orchestra nonetheless, and wish to use it. These opportunities are extremely rare, and will clearly become rarer. Even Philip Glass, who is certainly the most established opera composer alive, is often writing his pieces for a small amplified ensemble. Some operas, like the filmed examples, organize their players once, while the John Moran pieces, may not use any live musicians even during recording.

This is already old news. A review of one of Moran's pieces in the *New York Times*, didn't mention the fact that this was an opera with neither live singing or a musical instrument other than the computer.

I'd like to claim that instrumental possibilities for the orchestra will expand, and that we will have access to gamelan orchestras or Harry Partch's instruments, but it seems that the number of instruments will dwindle further, and Glass's ensemble of about six instruments plus prerecorded parts, or Hedwig's group of four rock 'n' roll musicians with some prerecorded parts, will be the only available option.

But what we *can* do was not imagined even by Wagner, Nancarrow, or Partch. And we doggone well better figure out why the Lord wished us to be born in this era by learning how to work these new instruments. Our model ought to be Bill Monroe incorporating all the old instruments into a new version of music, Harry Partch inventing new instruments for a completely new music, and Mozart adding clarinets just because they became available. It wasn't easy for any of them either...sixty years of one night stands for Bill and poverty at times for all three...who said this was for wimps?

Where Do You Get This Stuff From?

The most exciting opera opening I've seen was *Hedwig*, when after being carded and admitted to a typical skuzzy rock club with a pretty typical silly glam rock opening, the world shifts under your feet into an involved, heart-rending story, albeit of a heroine either unjustly dead or in such bad shape that she might be better off so.

The use of venues that participate in the story makes sense now not only because of the new resources one can use, like rock singers or PA systems, but economically. *Hedwig* ran for years, presumably made its costs back if not a profit, and had a large audience and developed rabid fans in part because renting the bar at the Riverview Hotel was a lot cheaper than the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

A parallel tack is to insert the performers into the projections, as Laurie Olinger does for the John Moran pieces, or as Kirby Malone and Gail Scott White have done for *Naked Revolution*. A few small props work wonders for this: in *Naked Revolution*, the onstage props included the original Komar & Melamid socialist realist paintings that were the genesis of the work! The creative approach to projected sets by Gail and Kirby was one reason that our budget was 0.5% of the cost of an opera of similar length and vocal forces at New York City Opera.



Eric Greene (Citizen George Washington), *Naked Revolution*, MPS, 2001.

It's only a matter of some time and work before the audience is incorporated into this stage, a virtual reality or total immersion opera. When this is solved, a typical theater will not be required, and perhaps only some projectors and PA systems and a few select props will be required to perform pieces anywhere. We will then use theaters only by choice...

Does This Mean Something?

It means that there ain't no standard path and everyone needs to figure it out for themselves. We are in the middle of a revolution in sound and design and ideas as great as any time in history, and we can't see it all. Only fifty years ago, Stockhausen, Cage, and Boulez could gain notoriety in modern music circles by being the first to use the *I Ching* or arbitrary timbre or rhythmic phrase differences or modifying some notation. Now, one can come up with comparable small discoveries almost effortlessly. True, the changes are mostly due to new technology, but that's been true throughout civilization. But the discoveries also come from exploring the past from a different point of view. That's how this operatic stuff all started, and how Wagner and Partch got their notions.

For the last example of new media opera directions these days, please go to the web <<http://www.mulatta.org/Elephonic.html>> where I have placed a two minute opera sung by two elephants, Luk Kang and Pratidah, with a live elephant orchestra performing in the Thai jungle. It's very classical except that the performance can't tour — the two divas are booked up.