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978-0-521-85675-1 - Opera and Society in Italy and France from Monteverdi to Bourdieu

Edited by Victoria Johnson, Jane F. Fulcher, and Thomas Ertman

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| OPERA AND SOCIETY IN ITALY AND FRANCE FROM  
MONTEVERDI TO BOURDIEU

This edited volume is the first book to bring together academic specialists writing on the multi-media operatic form from the disciplines of musicology, comparative literature, history, sociology, and philosophy. The presence in the volume's title of Pierre Bourdieu, the leading cultural sociologist of the late twentieth century, signals the editors' intention to synthesize recent advances in social science with recent advances in musicological and other scholarship on opera. Through a focus on opera in Italy and France, the contributors to the volume draw on their respective disciplines both to expand our knowledge of opera's history and to demonstrate the kinds of contributions that stand to be made by different disciplines to the study of opera. The volume is divided into three sections, each of which is preceded by a concise and informative introduction explaining how the chapters in that section contribute to our understanding of opera.

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*To the memory of Pierre Bourdieu, in gratitude*

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Condorcet, *l'instruction publique et la naissance du citoyen* (2nd edn., 1987); Jean-Philippe Rameau, *splendeur et naufrage de l'esthétique du plaisir à l'âge classique* (2nd edition, 1988, prix Charles Cros 1983); and *Poétique de l'opéra français de Corneille à Rousseau* (1991).

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## FOREWORD

Opera is delightfully contradictory. I don't mean simply that it is endlessly productive of arguments, though that is true. Opera fans debate favorite performances, praise or decry new productions in extravagant terms, and ally themselves passionately with Mozart or Verdi. Opera companies are equally ripe with controversy, dubious over conductors who seek too much authority, contentious about roles and repertory. Opera critics delight in provoking clashes over whether celebrity singers are past their prime, whether theatrical spectacle has triumphed regrettably over music, and whether restaging old favorites is driving out innovation. All these and other arguments are simply evidence that opera commands the passions of its varied participants. In the language of Pierre Bourdieu, it is a field of serious play to which they are committed.

The controversies reflect artistic taste, but also relationships of art to audience, to money, and to social organization. And herein lie some contradictions that shape the field of opera as a field of careers and companies, not only compositions and performances; and a field embedded in several changing contexts as far beyond the opera hall as nationalist politics and globalization, changing media and class structure, and shifting structures of patronage. This book reflects the interest of opera as a social phenomenon. This is an interest that extends beyond aesthetic evaluations and the engagements of fans, critics, or performers. But social studies of culture need not ignore aesthetics and can contribute to the understanding of fans, critics, and performers. The chapters in this book are informed by serious understanding of opera as music and theatre even while they enrich such understanding by considering other dimensions and contexts of opera.

The opera field, for example, is simultaneously structured by art and commerce: opera is expensive and yet ostensibly an art produced

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for art's sake. Opera is an insider's art yet closely attentive to box-office receipts. Its fans master mountains of detail, like baseball fans with their statistics, cricket fans with their histories. They volunteer as docents to be close to stars and opera houses. They listen to broadcasts preceded by pedantic prefaces. Yet its musical leaders and business managers alike curry contacts among patrons, hire publicists to reach beyond the cognoscenti, market their wares widely, and worry anxiously if single ticket sales don't make up for any slip in pricey subscriptions. Carreras, Domingo, and Pavarotti are all wonderful tenors who have sung difficult roles with distinction, and that isn't why they went on tour and recorded as the Three Tenors.

In fact, opera companies and houses have long been business institutions.<sup>1</sup> This is not an innovation in itself, though the forms of business organization have changed over opera's history. The patronage of the Doge or the Medici has unsurprisingly given way to that of capitalist corporations. The rise of the middle class changed the pattern of ticket sales (and also the meaning of being an opera fan). Recordings now rival performance in the economy of opera. And of course these changes affect even the aesthetic content and experience of opera. The experience of listening, for example, is transformed by the availability of recordings; so too even the performers' sense of pitch. And films of opera add still another dimension to this (and this hardly exhausts the range of interesting ways in which opera appears in film and has influenced the development of film and other genres).<sup>2</sup>

Art is sometimes seen (and artists sometimes portray their world) as the inverse of economic life. As Pierre Bourdieu famously wrote, however, the idea that the world of art is the economic world reversed reveals not the absence of strategic, even economic, interests in art but a systematic opposition between capacities to mobilize cultural and economic capital.<sup>3</sup> It is not, in other words, that those with cultural distinction do not want more of it and thus deploy their resources strategically to secure it. Nor is it even that they don't want cash. Neither is it the case that the rich have no need of strategies to secure cultural prestige or to pass their wealth on to their children by making

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sure they gain intellectual credentials and the patina of artistic taste. It is the case, however, that cultural and economic capitals are distinct and are accumulated by contrasting strategies, even though ultimately it is crucial that each can be converted into the other. Moreover, for this to work it is also important that the nature of values be misrecognized – as though there is no culture in the economy and no material interest in culture.

It is no accident that I have cited Pierre Bourdieu twice in just a few paragraphs. He was an important inspiration to the present project. Indeed, before his fatal illness intervened, Bourdieu planned to attend the conference on which the book is based and offer introductory remarks. He was and is much missed. His work has been influential nonetheless.<sup>4</sup> Not least, it is important for elaborating an approach to the different “fields” of social life that stresses their differentiation from and relations to each other (and thus often boundary struggles); the importance of emotional commitment of participants to social fields and their capacities for practical action within them; the importance of struggle over resources and prestige within fields; and the organization of fields by the way they relate to the accumulation of capital (including not only on an axis of greater or lesser capital but also in terms of the differentiation of forms of capital).

The idea of field is not simply a corrective to individualistic accounts of production. We should agree that “art worlds” require many more collaborators and participants than only the frontstage figures commonly credited with genius. But the notion of field goes further to posit a determinate relationship to a larger field of power and contestation – as opera is related to money and politics and social prestige. It posits an internal organization in terms of specific struggles for distinction (and possibly other “stakes”). And it is this which organizes ideals of purity, of art for art’s sake, and denigrations of mere journalists in relation to literature, mere decorators in relation to painting, popular music in relation to serious music (and more narrowly instrumental purity in relation to singing). Opera is at once a challenge to these ideals of aesthetic purity and a terrain of struggle over them:

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Poetry is contrasted to the work of mere hack librettists; “true opera” is contrasted to operetta and musical drama; performers and scholars both take pains to distinguish themselves from fans (even while they rely on them). And the oppositions are reproduced in fractal images on a smaller scale: proper musicologists distinguish themselves from literary scholars poaching on operatic turf, and both sometimes from sociologists. These ideals, moreover, reflect not simply timeless truth but an organization of knowledge in the modern era through the practical struggles that form fields and construct their specific species of capital.

Bourdieu stressed, in other words, the extent to which all of us in practical action shape trajectories through contradictory social pressures and opportunities. Like the innumerable operatic heroes and heroines (and sometimes comedic minor characters) who navigate seemingly improbable plots to conclusions that appear almost inevitable, we derive our identities and biographies from the ways in which both our origins and our actions – and those of others – situate us in relation to basic social contradictions. And so too opera itself has a history and social identity shaped by its often contradictory relations to its social context and organization conditions. It is “delightfully contradictory” as I said at the outset because it illuminates a great deal.

Consider, for example, opera’s locations in relation to the class structure (or in Bourdieusian terms to the accumulation of different quantities of capital). Opera is impossible to place – or rather, it occupies multiple places at the same time and shifting ones through history and in different contexts. In the contemporary United States opera is often seen as the epitome of “high art” – a special taste requiring significant cultivation and economic as well as cultural capital (and indeed it has been among the last of the major performance arts to surrender the notion that audiences should dress formally). But it does not look so in Italy or Argentina. And in many settings seating – and (more often in earlier years) standing – arrangements offer striking indices of class relations. Opera is popular and high art at once, and a source of insight into the way the distinction itself is deployed both by social analysts and by aesthetes and consumers. Notoriously expensive to stage, opera is

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particularly dependent on patronage. Yet it is also successful enough at securing both patronage and paying customers to be less dependent on state subsidies than most forms of “classical” music.

Opera is also interestingly contradictory in geopolitical terms. It is among the art forms with the strongest national traditions. These include aesthetic traditions, such as preferences in composers, differences in singing styles, greater or lesser emphases on spectacle, and patterns in popular plots and settings. Opera also figures in national political traditions in extra-aesthetic ways, however, as crowds at opera houses have reveled in a populist response to *The Marriage of Figaro*, found occasions to express contempt for unpopular ministers, and sparked influential riots. Yet at the same time, opera was a pioneer in globalization. Singers learned multiple languages and along with conductors and instrumentalists often moved from one nation to another. There is today a global operatic circuit traveled in different forms (and with different privileges) by stars, less famous performers, and indeed fans.

I won't go on. The point is simply that while there are virtues to social studies of all genres and fields of art, there are some sources of distinctive interest to opera.<sup>5</sup> Just as internally the tensions among music, theatre, and poetry shape opera, so various other contradictions shape its relations to social contexts. As articles in this book reveal, the relation of opera to politics is rich and instructive. So are opera's relations to economics and business, to transcultural relations, and to the social organization of cultural life more generally.

At the same time, culture is communication and creativity and important for the ways in which it represents the rest of society. Opera is of interest not only for its institutional organization and its relation to other social fields but for its portrayal of social and political relationships. Operas variously evoke and comment on social life in specific cities and countries and in entire eras. As essays in the first part of this book detail, they reveal much about themes from empire to gender. But the role of operatic representations is not merely to represent; opera is not only a tool for historians looking for indices as to how eighteenth-century French or Italian people thought about

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empire or gender. Operas, because they were seen by so many people and because they offered “schemas” for grasping social relations, played a constitutive as well as a reflective role. The way “the people” were portrayed on the operatic stage in *ancien régime* France was part of the way in which what we might call the “social imaginary” of a monarchical society was reproduced.<sup>6</sup>

As Bourdieu stressed, it would be a mistake to think that because much cultural work is creative, its function is all the production of new social relations. On the contrary, creative work is usually harnessed by the operatic field – as by the literary and other fields – in the service of social reproduction.<sup>7</sup>

Once again, we see the relevance of Bourdieu’s work. I cannot take the place of Pierre Bourdieu, or say what he might have said. But I do want to pay brief homage to him and suggest the importance of his work for projects such as understanding not only the relationship of opera to society but opera as a social phenomenon.

Bourdieu was a remarkable scholar – deeply educated in theory but always in pursuit of empirical knowledge, passionate about the importance of both art and science yet reasoned in his approach to them, a thinker who transcended disciplines without giving up intellectual discipline. He was trained initially in philosophy but gave up the “caste profits” available to philosophers for the more mundane but empirically informed approach of sociology. His sociology was never simply contained by academic boundaries, though, and he made fundamental contributions to anthropology, education, and literary studies, as well as to intellectual life broadly understood. Bourdieu wrote more extensively on literature and painting than on music, more on museums than theatres, but his analyses of the development of the ideal of the pure aesthetic and of the relationship between cultural and economic capital are of potentially great importance in music scholarship as well.

The time seems ripe for this undertaking. Musicologists have questioned ideologies of the pure aesthetic – without abandoning aesthetic concerns – and begun to ask increasingly interesting questions about the nature of listening, the social organization of both performances

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and audiences, and the social impact of music. Social science should prove helpful. At the same time, many (I'm afraid not enough) social scientists have tried to throw off the common allergy to aesthetics that has impeded the integration of cultural and social analysis. Too often they may have embraced approaches to aesthetics that seem old-fashioned to scholars of music or art, but not always, and in any case there is an important revolution simply in bringing aesthetic concerns – and thus concerns for experience, meaning, and judgment – into the heart of social science. This offers the potential for social analyses of cultural productions that are not simply reductions to social causes and effects.

Equally, a rich study of opera's involvements in social contexts means going beyond the reading of libretti for an exploration of social significance. Obviously scholars have also studied riots outside opera houses and social pressures influencing taste in operas. But too few studies work adequately on music and staging as well as verbal content (just as too much music scholarship treats libretti and theatre as poor cousins).<sup>8</sup> I think of some of this as the *Tamu-Tamu* effect.

It happened that I was at the 1973 premiere of this late Menotti opera, since it was commissioned by the International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences. The opera concerns the displacement of Southeast Asian refugees into an American suburb to disturb the serene obliviousness of its residents and comment on global conflicts (this was the era of the Vietnam War). Its politically correct libretto and dramatic action are perhaps no more absurd than those of many operas. But note that the way in which Menotti sought to have relevance to the time, to politics, and to social science was overwhelmingly contained within libretto and dramatic action; the music had a supporting role.

Menotti also chose a staging that made a minimal break between audience and action. He did not find in opera a specific form of expression that gave him any more license to explore controversial themes than did the form of academic paper, welcoming address, or ordinary theatre (and this may be less a matter of his choices than of the times). In this, the premiere of *Tamu-Tamu* was significantly different from, say,

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the famous Paris staging of *The Marriage of Figaro*. Mozart's music was not only more beautiful and interesting (forgive the gratuitous evaluation) but played a more important role. Right from the overture, it opened up a space in which the radical content of Beaumarchais's play could be presented without similar repression. The opera created a liminal space, more distant from political critique than the spoken word theatre, more outside of everyday life, and yet able to engage its categories.<sup>9</sup> Of course music did far more than that; it served also as more than just an aid to memory, more than an added aspect of entertainment. It was and is also part of the meaning of the opera, and certainly part of what makes Mozart's opera endure beyond Beaumarchais's play. Conversely, the libretto is less than meets the eye. In the obvious sense, potentially controversial parts of the play were dropped from the opera. But it is crucial to recognize both that audiences knew this and were able to supply some of the missing content, and that the very omissions signaled the significance of the unstageable actions. This is a relatively commonplace bit of opera history; I don't claim to adduce new facts. I want merely to illustrate the importance of working beyond the confines of a conception of social significance or impact which focuses on manifest content – of either operas or responses to them.

I would note also, finally, a minor bit of the *Tamu-Tamu* story that suggests the renewed relevance of an old issue in a changed context. The soprano Menotti chose to sing the lead was Sung Sook Lee. *Tamu-Tamu* gave her a big break and she went on to a distinguished international career. At the height of it, however, she converted to evangelical Christianity (reversing some of Menotti's East comes West imagery) and announced she could no longer sing opera, which she regarded as inherently profane, but only sacred music. Of course opera had run afoul of clerical disapproval before. Indeed, it is a musical tradition that has proved interestingly refractory to religious appropriation (though a genre of sacred opera was created to provide for performances during Lent). One of the senses in which opera has generally been "popular" rather than high art is precisely that it has been profane. This is a different axis from that usually used to distinguish popular from high art,



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but the history which it calls to our attention is in fact very relevant, even if forgotten by most sociologists thinking about the categories. This reminds us again that the operatic tradition is not just internal, not something that can be grasped only by attending to opera. Attention is also required to operas intertwining with other cultural traditions, including in such oppositions as profane or secular to sacred. And as Lee's example suggests, this is not just textual but a matter of the lives and careers of artists.

The very notion of tradition needs interrogation. When we speak about the development of the Italian opera tradition (or later the French or German) and on this basis also make claims about what constitutes "real" opera, we need not only good and plentiful facts, and also careful considerations of just what we mean by Italian, French, or German at different points in history or from the different perspectives of performers, patrons, and audiences. We need also care in considering just how tradition – literally, passing on or handing over – is accomplished. What are the different roles of explicit teaching and of imitation? What is the relationship of tradition over time to integration at one time – as among the many different crafts involved in producing an opera? How are the parts of tradition that result in or depend on written records to be related to those that do not? How do elite and popular participants in tradition influence it (and each other)? Is it always innovation that is in need of explanation or should analysis focus as much on the recuperative, reproductive capacity of tradition? My point is not, alas, that social science has the perfect theory of tradition and musicologists need only to import it. Rather, the point is that opera is a terrific site for the interrogation of what tradition means and how its different dimensions interrelate.

Conversely, of course, there is the curse of becoming "classical" and all the debates about the relationship of old to new in operatic repertoires. What does it mean for so much of the core repertory to have been composed by the nineteenth century, and for that composed later to fare so much better with conservatories and critics than broader publics? What are the implications of the aging of opera audiences in many countries?

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There are many more questions, of course, and undoubtedly many will be stimulated that neither I nor the contributors to this volume have imagined. This is just one of the many reasons that I am very pleased that the Social Science Research Council was able to organize the conference from which this book developed. I would also thank NYU for the use of its magnificent Villa La Pietra, allowing us to meet in the vicinity of Florence during the opera festival. I would like to thank the editors for helping to establish the link between the ephemeral event and enduring scholarship. In Pierre Bourdieu's memory I am pleased to note their passion for their intellectual undertaking, their openness to perspectives from numerous fields, and their willingness to see how claims to disciplinary boundaries and professional expertise are also claims to specific forms of capital and can sometimes be blinkers as well as aids in the pursuit of knowledge. They and the contributors have used disciplinary expertise but also transcended its limits.

Craig Calhoun  
Social Science Research Council

## NOTES

- 1 See Beth L. Glixon and Jonathan E. Glixon, *Inventing the Business of Opera: The Impresario and His World in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) and Victoria Johnson, "Founding Culture: Art, Politics, and Organization at the Paris Opera, 1669–1792 (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2002).
- 2 See chapter 10 below by Michael P. Steinberg and Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg.
- 3 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) and "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed," in *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 29–73.
- 4 Jane Fulcher's recent work is both indicative of the growing influence of Bourdieu among musicologists and an influence on expanding that. See

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*French Cultural Politics and Music from the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), and more substantially *The Composer as Intellectual: Music and Ideology in France 1914–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); also chapter 12 in this volume.

- 5 This theme is developed especially in Part III of the current book.
- 6 See chapter 3 below by Catherine Kintzler.
- 7 See Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Culture, and Society* (London: Sage, second edition, 1990).
- 8 It is helpful, thus, that in this book several of the studies that address the representation of society on the operatic stage directly consider not only the libretti, but the music and indeed the use of dance, sets, and specificities of staging.
- 9 See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (New York: Aldine, 1969) on liminality. The term simply refers to a threshold; operas use a variety of devices to mark a distinction from the quotidian, including not only music but the very pomp of the opera as event and the style of the opera hall.

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