

**Audience Experience During Italian Opera
Performances in Italy in the 18th and 19th Century
vs. Audience Experience During Italian Opera
Performances in North America Today**

Or

**Why We Should Ditch the Concert Hall and Hit the
Bar**

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Ditch the Concert Hall and Hit the Bar

PART I: Opera in Crisis

“I bear no grudge. Even though my heart may break....”

The words rolling out of my stereo suddenly jar me. They are familiar, but I can't place them. Yes, now I recognize the English translation of Heinrich Heine's poem, *Ich grolle nicht* made famous in Schumann's setting from *Dichterliebe*. But I am not listening to Schumann's music. The song is written and performed by Andrew Bird, a violinist/singer/songwriter specializing in indie-rock. While I like Schumann's version better, more people will likely be familiar with Andrew Bird's *Pathetique* than Schumann's *Ich grolle nicht*. But does that make one song more relevant to society than the other?

In his article “Bourgeois Opera,” Theodor Adorno may have an explanation for why opera and art song are less predominant in our culture than rock music. He finds that “opera's place and function become questionable in today's society.....[and opera has come to be] peripheral and indifferent” (Adorno, 25). Along with many other thinkers, Adorno feels that opera has become a “museum”(Ibid, 41) that functions to preserve historical works.

What has caused opera to become so peripheral in today's society? Is it the difficult language of contemporary music? The extensive repetition of a well-worn cannon of works? The impact of modern recordings? It is likely a combination of most of these factors, amongst others. I would like to focus, however, not on the traditions that grace the well-lit stage of an opera house, but rather on the traditions that influence the spectators watching in the dark. Because, without an audience, opera cannot exist.

By comparing an opera spectator's experience in Italy during the 18th and 19th centuries to the experience of a present-day opera spectator in North America, I hope to prove that today's concert-going traditions neither correspond with the needs of today's audience, nor the intentions or expectations of Italian bel canto composers. The conservative audience, seeking operatic perfection, has shifted control over the spectator's experience from the spectator himself to the artists on the stage. This exclusive dynamic leaves the members of the audience that are new to opera (the uninitiated) feeling guilty for their lack of knowledge in operatic traditions and ritual.

PART II : Long Ago And Far Away

Before we can understand what a modern-day audience experiences in the theaters of North America, we must first consider what audiences experienced when the major Italian works in the cannon premiered. What kind of audience was the composer writing for?

Italian opera must have been a party. Talking, flirting, visiting, eating, and card playing figured predominantly in an evening at the opera. The opera house was the most important social environment in most Italian cities. It reinforced social status through the physical placement of spectators in the hall. At Il Teatro San Carlo in Naples the number of candles a man kept in front of his box correlated directly with his ranking in the social hierarchy. This house (constructed in 1737) was one of Italy's most important opera houses. Yet, San Carlo audiences were known throughout Europe for their lack of manners (Gishford, 38- 45). Samuel Sharp was an English surgeon, and upon his visit to The San Carlo opera house in Naples in 1765, he was shocked at the audience's behavior. He reported that "members of the audience are just as busy as the performers....oranges and liquid refreshment are being offered for sale" (Weiss and Taruskin, 231-234). Sharp was scandalized by the audience's inattentiveness. "The crowd laughed and talked through the whole performance, without any restraint; and, it may be imagined, that an assembly of so many hundreds conversing together so loudly, must entirely cover the voices of the singers"(Ibid). It becomes clear that at Teatro San Carlo during the 18th century, the audience was in control of their own experience at the opera, and even the greatest amount of 'shushing' wouldn't quiet them down during the recitatives.

For a more specific example of Italian audiences we travel to Italy's most famous theater, Teatro alla Scala in Milan. On February 5th 1887, at 8:15 pm, Giuseppe Verdi's masterpiece *Othello* premiered at La Scala. The Milanese audience was better behaved than their Neapolitan counterparts. Though, spectators would still walk around, eat, drink and chatter during performances. La Scala was also, for a time, the only place in Milan where gambling was permitted. Yet, by 1778, management at the house imposed some bylaws to calm the sometimes rowdy audience. Displays of disapproval during a performance were prohibited. The bylaws also forbade encores and calling a singer back onto the stage more than once (Gishford, 19-37). Though these rules seem uncalled for to a present day North American, many of these rules were

broken during the premiere of Verdi's *Othello*.

Francis Hueffer, a journalist from *The Times* (London), reviewed *Othello's* premier. He explains that though the performance began at quarter past eight, it did not end until after midnight. Most of the evening was not taken up by the performance, but by intermissions and encores. A review from *La Lombardia* reports that the music was interrupted several times by applause and demands for Verdi to appear on stage. Both instrumental and vocal numbers were applauded so extensively that several of them were repeated during the performance. After the opera was finally over, Verdi was called onto the stage four times, as people cheered, waving their handkerchiefs (Kelly, 373-382).

Opera in Italy during 18th and 19th century was social, loud, and exciting. New works in the audience's native language were premiered often by well-loved composers like Donizetti, Verdi, Bellini and Rossini (Ibid). The atmosphere of Italian opera houses in the 18th and 19th century was quite different from the atmosphere in opera houses today. In his book, "Opera Before Mozart" Michael Robinson explains that "those now accustomed to go to the opera and listen without distractions of any kind should realize that the general public's habit of listening avidly to an entire performance has been comparatively recently formed" (Robinson, 40). If that is the case, who or what changed the way we experience opera?

PART III: Hey! Who Turned Out The Lights?

"Wagner....did more than anyone to get the public listening properly" (Ibid, 49) Robinson says. In theaters influenced by Wagner (like his own theater, Bayreuth) the construction of the theater itself and the parameters surrounding performances demanded that the audience listen to an entire performance. Wagner turned down the lights, hid the orchestra, and designed a theater that would keep people in their seats (Gishford, 114).

In an article called *Basic Characteristics of the Art Work of the Future*, Richard Wagner argued that he wanted to change the way audiences experienced drama. He claimed that art had become the "private property of an artist class; the pleasure it provides is reserved to those who understand it" (Weiss, 203). His solution? Wagner believed that by making drama as universally intelligible as possible, everyone would be able to enjoy it. He wanted his audience, through looking and hearing, to be "completely transported to the stage" (Ibid, 205). Audiences were meant to live the drama and forget that they were in a theater. Wagner hoped this would direct

the audience towards a greater humanity. But in order to achieve this goal Wagner had to create and then “train his own audiences,” (Lindenberger, 223) which he did, quite successfully. This ideal spread and has had a huge impact on the way we enjoy the performing arts today.

In the centuries before, Wagner audiences “knew it was they that controlled opera; it did not control them”(Weiss, 41). The noise they created was evidence to that fact. After Wagner, however, the power dynamic shifted. This is the moment when audiences began to place opera on a pedestal. Now, opera required “maximum concentration and seriousness from performers and audience alike” (Gishford, 114). This new-found silence and focus from the audience finally allows artists to strive for perfection and reach new artistic heights.

I feel that this was the beginning of opera’s crisis. This was the moment when people began to be intimidated and/or bored by the opera. Despite Wagner’s good intentions, the uneducated and the uninitiated were forced to sit for hours, without chatter, in a dark room, watching a difficult and unfamiliar performance with no opportunity for respite. The chance to ease oneself into the language and tradition of opera was no longer available. Now opera was serious, and the audience wasn’t allowed to have its own fun.

By the time Wallace K. Harriman began designing the new Met hall (which opened in 1966), the best acoustic and sight lines were scientifically measured in order to allow everyone to see and hear everything (Ibid, 225-245). Like Bayreuth, the new Met allowed patrons to be more anonymous. The architecture encourages patrons to focus their attention on the stage rather than on each other (Ibid, 114).

PART IV: Ritual and Opera Today

Attending opera in North America today must be a very different experience from attending opera in Italy centuries ago. Much of the excitement and ‘newness’ that accompanied opera in 19th century Italy has passed. In North America today, new works are a rarity. Audiences are conservative and avoid the sometimes difficult sounds of modern art music (Pleasants, 9-17). They demand their favorite operas like *La Bohème* and *The Magic Flute*. So, management dips into the operatic cannon, performing the most popular operas over and over again. During the 1989-1992 seasons at the Met, forty-nine operas were produced. Forty-one of those operas are considered to be amongst the most frequently performed 100 operas in the cannon (Evans, 173-224). In his book *Phantasmagoria: A Sociology of Opera*, David Evans even

goes as far as to suggest that we compensate for this inherent lack of newness by creating new productions and wild re-interpretations of old works (Ibid). This tradition, too, can be traced back to Wagner who championed the theatrical reinterpretation of past works.

There are many factors that have led to the conservatism of the opera audience. In his book *Opera in Crisis*, Henry Pleasants believes that the conservatism is “institutional, concerned primarily with preserving the symbols of an established social order”(Pleasants, 15-16). He feels that this institution has almost reached the point of ritual, as most people go to the opera today “just as they go to church, sincere enough in their worship, whether of God or Beethoven, but also savoring the respectability of their attendance and the assumption of connoisseurship” (Ibid). Essentially, Pleasants argues that attending the opera as a connoisseur allows a spectator to feel part of an elite club with its own rituals.

Now that there exists what Evans calls “authoritarian relations between stage and the audience...[where] the listener becomes increasingly passive” (Evans, 405) audiences are meant to know their place “socially, ritually and (un)knowledgeably” (Ibid, 390). At an opera house in North America I know from experience that I am not allowed to talk, whisper, eat, drink, move around, sleep, cough or laugh too loudly during a performance. Clapping at the wrong moment is also an embarrassing offence to operatic ritual. This ritual takes place in a custom-built hall designed to keep out all distraction and has been established and maintained by the hard-core opera fans. These fans know the legends, gossip, voices and politics of opera, Evans calls them the “in-group” or the subculture of opera. They are very visible at important North American halls like the Met. They are the ones (music students are included in this group) who keep opera on a pedestal, demanding conditions for the best possible musical performance. It is Wagner’s ideal audience; trained, initiated and eager to seek a higher purpose in music. Lindenberger, in his book *Opera, The Extravagant Art* recognizes this desire, explaining that “like other ceremonial forms...opera can draw us temporarily out of our individual selves and raise us to what we take to be a higher form of consciousness” (Lindenberger, 285). With this goal in mind, Wagner’s 19th century theatrical aesthetic, that focuses all attention on the stage, has become accepted performance practice here in North America. Control over operatic experience has finally shifted completely from the audience to the performer.

While this ritual ensures a higher quality of performance, it is at the same time exclusive. Evans warns that “getting people into the opera house...remains a problem” (Evans, 402). Most

people who are unfamiliar with opera see the genre as “an exclusive club...a lifestyle accouterment for those with wealth and power,”(Ibid, 420) and find the concert hall intimidating. Most operatic works are in Italian, French and German, not in English, the native language of most patrons (though surtitles do help a great deal). Many others find opera boring. Lindenberger explores many famous accounts of this, including cartoons from the New Yorker that feature a bored middle-class husband being dragged to the opera by his wife (Lindenberger, 201). I refuse to believe that it is the music that has caused this boredom and intimidation. I think the problem lies in the way the audience experiences opera.

Lindenberger believes that opera’s length contributes to audience boredom. “Like other forms in a high style that must strive to sustain their intensity over long intervals, opera has been called....boring” (Lindenberger, 200). Yes, two to four hours is a long time to sustain one’s attention, but it’s *possible* that these operas were written with the expectation that the audience wouldn’t listen to every note. As we have established, when the operas of Verdi, Rossini, and Donizetti were premiered, audiences chattered, ate and wandered in and out during performances. In short, they did not pay attention to the entire production. If Verdi and Rossini were great composers that knew how to please an audience, would they not take into consideration the audience’s usual behavior when composing an opera? Audience demand greatly impacted the numbers of arias written into operas during the 19th century- so why shouldn’t audience inattention effect the way a composer wrote opera. Robinson explored this possibility when he lamented the Italian audience’s inattention, claiming it led to poor librettos and recitative. Because most Italians spoke during recitative, he felt composers put less effort into its composition (Robinson, 49).

PART V: Plurality, Talkin’ ‘Bout A Revolution

We have established that the opera experience today differs greatly from the Italian opera experience centuries ago. But does our tradition correspond with the needs of today’s audience? For an answer we need only turn to more popular performance genres. For example, live rock shows. At a rock show, the crowd is undoubtedly in control. They can choose to talk, drink, walk around or pay attention to the music. The atmosphere at a rock show almost seems akin to the atmosphere one might imagine at opera premieres in Italy during the 19th century. Even at the

cinema, where lights are turned low and our full attention is expected, our attention is only requested for a short amount of time. Most films only last an hour-and-a-half to two hours.

It seems that in our quest to be more authentic and true to the composer in our musical performances, we have forgotten about authenticity of the audience's experience. The way an audience experiences opera today in North America serves neither the composers' original expectations nor the needs of an uninitiated 21st century audience. Something has to give.

I believe the answer to this problem is acknowledging the audience in the hall and their needs. In the December edition of *Opera News*, several North American operatic productions are reviewed, not one review mentions how the audience reacted. Compared with reviews from 19th century Italy, which focus on the audience's reaction, it is clear that our operatic priorities have changed. Perhaps it is time to relinquish control over the operatic experience and give it back to the crowd.

I'm not saying we should turn up the lights and sell peanuts at Place Des Arts (though that would be fun.) I think we need to expand our understanding of an evening at the opera. I believe singers should experiment with new venues, new concert hall traditions, and new audience experiences. There are both benefits and drawbacks to this experimentation. If singers take opera to where the uninitiated listener is, without all the rules, it is certain the music will suffer. Singing in a smokey bar is never as easy as singing in a concert hall, and being ignored as a performer is frustrating. Yet, even with these conditions, I feel that we (singers) better serve the composer and ourselves as musicians by performing beautiful music for people who have never heard it before. The answer is in plurality. Experimentation does not mean that traditional opera would disappear. On the contrary, I think it would help traditional opera to thrive. Just as Andrew Bird's song *Pathetique* can exist beside Schumann's masterpiece, and Norrington's *Don Giovanni* can exist alongside Furtwangler's, opera in new contexts can exist along with opera in the traditional opera house. By taking opera outside of the concert hall, without "dumbing down" the music à la *Il Divo*, we could expand opera's cultural relevance. Just as someone may discover Schumann's original *Ich grolle nicht* through Andrew Bird's version, someday, perhaps, someone who heard us sing in a noisy bar will want to hear the music at its best, and will give Wagner's vision a try.

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