

Nicholas Payne

TRENDS AND INNOVATIONS IN EUROPEAN OPERA

The (very) English playwright and composer Noel Coward, author of the charming if retrograde operetta *Bitter Sweet*, was once waylaid at the opera by a formidable female admirer. ‘The trouble with opera’, she opined, ‘is that it is not what it used to be’. To which Coward replied: ‘No, madam, the trouble with opera is that it is exactly what it used to be’.

On the surface, many aspects of opera appear not to have changed. It is performed in grand and historic theatres. The spectacle is often one of extravagant display. It carries a weight of tradition and heritage. Top ticket prices are perceived to be inaccessible to ordinary people. The repertory is dominated by the same old operas.

Under the surface, though, there have been many shifts. Some are structural; others are aesthetic, or presentational. Let us examine the principal ones.

Repertory

When I first went to the opera, the standard repertory covered two hundred years, from Gluck’s *Orfeo* to the (then) new operas of Britten and Henze. Today, it encompasses four hundred years, from Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* to Birtwistle’s, still classically derived, *Minotaur*. The breadth of this much richer heritage is demonstrated by the latest edition of Opera Europa’s Future Production Plans database, in which a cross-section of 52 companies lists 450 productions of 250 operas by 128 composers. The downside of this gain is that it can leave less space for new creations, which may be marginalised by the sheer bulk of opera’s magnificent legacy. Yet, the same database includes 40 new operas in its total, a proportion of 16%.

Repertoire and stagione

The repertoire pattern of performances, whereby a substantial body of operas may be presented in rotation by a strong resident ensemble, remains the prevailing method employed by the great opera houses of Germany and Central Europe. It is by far the most productive system when operated at capacity, as in cities like Dresden, Munich, Prague and Vienna. But, across Europe, repertoire is in retreat. The Italian *stagione* system, already the norm in most of France and Spain, is gaining ground; or variations of it are being adopted elsewhere as traditional ensemble companies are being dismantled. The erosion of this precious training ground for opera practitioners is compensated, to some extent, by the potential for improved standards deriving from carefully rehearsed productions with locked-in casts. The emphasis is moving away from

developing a company for the long term and towards the more ephemeral achievement of an 'event'.

Vernacular and original language

During much of the 19th and first part of the 20th century, composers expected their operas to be presented in the audience's own language, as with a play. The growing practice of performance in the original language was given an enormous boost by the introduction of surtitles, first at the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto, but rapidly spreading worldwide. These titles are the electronic equivalent of the printed libretto made available in the lighted auditoria of the 18th and early 19th century. They are credited with instilling a more concentrated attention in our now darkened auditoria and as a highly effective educative tool. At the same time, they have contributed to the loss of direct communication between singer and audience in a shared language, which used to underpin the operatic experience and which may still be found at the few remaining companies which use the vernacular.

Co-productions

When most opera companies possessed their own production facilities, sharing sets and costumes was rarely desirable or necessary. Jointly owned or borrowed productions began as a device to maintain or increase the number of new productions in a season, but have become standard industry practice as an increasingly sophisticated means to share both costs and ideas. It is no coincidence that their growth has coincided with a downsizing of many theatres' production workshops and the outsourcing of production making to independent providers. The loss of these crafts within the opera house weakens self-sufficiency, and the process can cause difficulties between theatres which are physically or aesthetically incompatible. On the other hand, co-productions have proved an effective way to disseminate the work of important creative artists to a wider and more geographically diverse audience.

A united Europe

'The Fall of the Berlin Wall' in November 1989 was a symbol of the removal of a much more extensive 'Iron Curtain' which divided Europe into the eastern communist and more affluent western blocs. The 'triumph of capitalism' has created its own economic problems, not only for the former eastern bloc nations, but it has integrated Poland, the Czech and Slovak Republics, Hungary, the Baltic states and some of the Balkan countries within the common market of the European Union. In practice, this open market for labour extends beyond the EU to include Russia and its satellite states. The balance of trade is uneven, and some of the economies remain frail and over-dependent on foreign investment, but the process is irreversible. Germany's success in absorbing the massive economic burden of reunification speaks of its reserves of strength, which is also testified by the survival of the world's most extensive and productive network of opera houses. But the spectacular growth of opera in countries with far less operatic tradition, as distant as Norway and Spain, and the ever more harmonious collaboration evident

among the increasing number of Opera Europa members, all show that, for opera at least, the Common Market thrives as a force for development.

The impact of Asia

More than one thousand singers were auditioned worldwide, from whom forty were selected for the final rounds of the most recent edition of the NEUE STIMMEN competition at Gütersloh in northern Germany. None of the seven finalists came from 'old Europe'. The first three prizes were all awarded to Koreans. Here was rather chastening evidence that we live today in a global market and that, as in many other areas, the talent, training and industry coming out of Asia are contributing to Europe's future, even in traditional strongholds. It initially surprised me when the New National Theatre Tokyo and the National Centre for the Performing Arts Beijing applied to join Opera Europa, but they have a hunger for the European model and have proved exemplary partners in our enterprise.

All these factors contribute towards the internationalisation of opera. It has been an accelerating trend during the past twenty years, though its origins go back further than that. With hindsight, one might generalise that the first twenty years after World War Two saw the democratisation of the pre-war model, a process enabled first by application of public subsidy from social democratic inclining states, and second by the invention and wide distribution of the long-playing record. During the mid-60s to mid-80s, the leading theatres worldwide adopted an international outlook serviced by an elite cadre of top artists, while the domestic level remained wedded to national characteristics. Since the late-90s, the majority of companies have, to a greater or lesser extent been affected by the six principal factors described above. Some will argue that a seventh factor, the impact of technology, should be added to the list, but I would contend that its effect is on delivery rather than the core product, and that it should therefore be addressed in a later section.

The changes to opera over the past twenty years are not an isolated phenomenon. Similar trends may be noted in pop music, in film, and in painting and the plastic arts. Each has to jostle for the public's attention in an increasingly crowded global market place. If opera wishes to compete, it is inevitable that it will find it harder to be self-contained and reliant on the old values and structures.

So, in order to address these changes, managers have had to rethink and adapt their business models, or to adopt new ones. It is a tribute to their ingenuity, or to the enduring appetite for the art form, to discover how well most institutions have survived. Given the high incidence of bankruptcies and takeovers in the commercial world, there have been remarkably few business failures in the operatic world. No important opera house has closed, except for renovation. Magnificent new theatres have been built during the last decade in Copenhagen, Oslo and Valencia, while others have been expensively restored.

The top brands would have been recognised as such twenty, or fifty, years ago: the New York Metropolitan, La Scala Milan, London's Covent Garden, the Paris Opera and Vienna State Opera. The opening up of Russia has enabled Moscow's Bolshoi and Saint-Petersburg's Mariinsky theatres to establish their premium brands in the international market; and some of the leading German-speaking theatres enjoy worldwide recognition. This eminence is a valuable commodity, because of the growing number of theatres which are now competing to secure the top artists.

Needless to say, solvency is not simply the outcome of virtuous financial practice. The solidity of state support in the traditionally strong artistic economies of Germany and France, Austria and Switzerland, has underpinned their broad national provision. In the less traditional operatic countries, such as the United Kingdom and Spain, a plural funding model which strikes a balance of public and private support has proved a surprisingly effective compromise between 'old European' and New World ways. Declining funding from the national budget has threatened the status of Italian opera and eroded the productivity of its leading theatres, but even that crisis is beginning to provoke new models. Likewise, the economic upheavals of the post-communist countries have created instability in Eastern Europe, but are also enforcing fresh thinking and different solutions.

Income

If public subventions are static or in decline, then the emphasis must fall on other sources of revenue. In descending order of importance, they are:

1. Ticket sales are the barometer of public interest. While their importance as a factor in total revenue varies considerably, they remain the single most powerful indicator of approval. A half-empty theatre spells audience indifference, which damages not only the revenue stream but also the confidence of funding bodies. A sold-out house is the best advertisement, because success breeds success. In festivals such as Bregenz, Glyndebourne and Savonlinna, ticket sales are the primary source of income; but, even for those companies less dependent on sales, the box office percentage is a key economic indicator.
2. Private contributions in Europe are unlikely to assume the dominant position they hold in the United States. Whereas an American may individually choose where a proportion of his taxes will be spent, thanks to a system of tax incentives which rewards philanthropy, the European still delegates most of that power, and therefore that responsibility, to the state. Yet, there are stirrings of a counter movement, bred by a disillusion with bureaucracy and, in worse cases, with corruption. Although centralised finance ministries will continue to resist offering tax breaks, they are on the increase. In France, private contributions to the arts have increased dramatically after a relaxation of the tax

laws. But, whereas such contributions were once primarily made by the corporate sector, the trend is towards an increasing reliance on individual donors.

3. State underwriting of opera is a relatively recent phenomenon. Opera began as a plaything of princes, before becoming an entrepreneurial venture. Handel was a businessman as well as a composer. Today, opera houses are once again exploring the commercial potential of their buildings and of their product. Managements seek to supplement revenue from their core business of presenting opera by exploiting the asset of a large public building with a premium value. They are also alert to using modern reproductive technology to making their primary products available through secondary rights in other media, such as cinema, television and commercial recordings. While their promotional value may be greater than their profitability in many cases, these opportunities can play a part in the mixed economy of opera today.

Opera has remained backward in joining the public/private partnership world. In many parts of Europe, the reliance on state support is still paramount. Yet, English 'country house opera', exemplified by Glyndebourne and its imitators, is not the only exception to this rule. At the other end of Europe, Belgrade's Madlenianum Opera and Theatre in Serbia and Operosa of Evxinograd near Varna in Bulgaria are both entirely privately financed. There will be more such enterprises.

In the comparable worlds of spoken theatre and modern art, there is a more even balance between subsidy and commerce. Not only do they co-exist, but they feed off each other. The commercial sector benefits from the longer-term investment of the subsidised sector, while the latter has learned to adopt an increasingly commercial attitude to programming and marketing, in order to thrive in the market conditions. These lessons will gradually be applied to opera, too.

Expenditure

As the proportions are adjusted in the mixture of revenue sources, so they will be in the division of expenditure. Traditionally, opera is very labour intensive, because of its requirements for larger forces of singers, orchestral musicians, and technical and administrative back-up. The full-time salary bill can absorb as much as three-quarters of the total budget. That sort of establishment level may be justified, if it delivers a substantial body of work, but the danger is that it may grow ever greater over time until the maintenance of the permanent staff becomes an end in itself. It becomes necessary to ask what services are provided for those salaries, and whether the time-honoured services are what are now required to produce the work. Do labour agreements provide the flexibility to rehearse and perform as today's creative artists and today's mobile audience demands? Do they encompass the secondary rights necessary to disseminate work through other media? How

may they be reformed in ways which protect social rights and expectations, while at the same time fitting today's patterns of work?

The answers will vary according to the different practices and priorities of the wide range of institutions in the many countries which make up Europe. But, in each case, it will be necessary to strike a balance in the productivity equation, if a long-term future is to be secured. Some companies carry within themselves the capacity for evolution and self-renewal. Others may require a more radical revolution, even destruction, if opera is to be born again in their community.

New models

While many of the great historical opera houses have successfully managed the transition into the 21st century, there has at the same time been a movement towards smaller, more flexible models. Some artists prefer not to be bound by permanent contracts. Some managers seek to minimise overheads, and to concentrate resources towards employing freelance workers specific to each project.

In the United Kingdom during 2008/09, the six major operatic institutions supplied 849 performances. During the same period, a further 78 smaller organisations were recorded as presenting around one thousand performances of opera and music-theatre. The work of Netherlands Opera in Amsterdam is supplemented by that of two dedicated companies, Nationale Reisopera and Opera Zuid, which tour extensively within Holland, and by several smaller scale troupes. Even Germany, with its rich infrastructure of almost one hundred theatre-based opera companies, is experiencing a growth in alternative and experimental opera projects.

Most of the smaller opera groups are artist-led. They reflect the need of composers and conductors, singers and production teams, to express themselves outside the constraints of the big institutions. Many are financially precarious, but light-footed enough to survive economic downturns and, if necessary, to hibernate until warmer conditions return. Crucially, they are moulded to the needs of the creative forces, and can respond to new developments in the art more readily than the larger companies with their obligations to maintain an established staff and the imperative to pursue challenging targets for ticket sales.

It would be wrong to conclude that the flexible smaller-scale models are set to supplant the traditional opera houses. The public continues to seek out the spectacular experience which grand opera can provide. Governments and powerful philanthropists are employing imaginative architects to design imposing buildings for the 21st century. Rather, both trends, the small and the great, are part of an increasingly rich operatic ecology. It is significant that the new Oslo Opera House, opened in 2008, was built with a large measure of popular

support, has rapidly become Norway's No. 1 tourist attraction, and sees part of its mission as reaching out towards the whole population of its geographically dispersed country.

Partnerships

Every artistic institution values its independence. One of Opera Europa's defining beliefs is that each member opera company is unique and autonomous. Yet, the association's purpose is to strengthen opera companies throughout Europe by means of mutual support and collective action. The watchword is collaboration. After seven years as its director, I would judge the dominant impulse to be towards creating working partnerships. Divided Europe will fall; together it may thrive.

My admiration is great for those theatres like the Tiroler Landestheater in Innsbruck, which maintain a strong ensemble and production facilities, capable of staging Berlioz's epic *Les Troyens* this season, while eschewing co-productions and private sponsorship. It is a valid model with its own integrity. But the trend is away from such self-sufficiency.

Partnerships may take several forms. The initial purpose behind sharing productions was, in many instances, the desire to save money. It resulted in some uneasy alliances between theatres with very different technical facilities and working patterns. Co-productions have become more sophisticated with experience and the development of mutual trust. The best may help to save costs, but their higher purpose is to share an artistic ideal so that it may reach a wider audience. Although it involves risk, such a partnership can be especially productive when investing in new creative work.

It is not only a question of matching scales of production. Some of the more imaginative partnerships may involve collaboration between a large permanent opera house and a small occasional group. The latter may provide the former with an innovative project, while benefiting from the promotional exposure of working with a larger institution. This inter-dependent model has become common enough to form a principal theme of Opera Europa's 2010 conference in Rotterdam, under the title of OPERA sans frontières.

Looking ahead to the next European Opera Forum in London in 2011, it is planned to examine the wider issues of what opera is and should be today. What do creative artists want? What do contemporary audiences demand? How shall we fashion this ancient, but always modern, art to the needs of our new century?

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Nicholas Payne a été directeur d'Opéra (Welsh National Opera, Covent Garden, English National Opera) et dirige aujourd'hui Opera Europa, club qui rassemble plus de 110 maisons d'opéra principalement européennes.