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Article abstract

Site-specific opera are those works which are either composed for, or produced in (or both) a prescribed space other than that of the opera house. The particular site chosen for the production of such a work has a profound effect on how that work of art is received. Questions are raised with regard to the work's meaning and its relationship to the time and place of the site in which it is performed. In order to better understand the spatial and temporal richness within site-specific opera, recent productions of European and North American operas from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are considered. Based upon composer/librettist intentions, the site of the premiere production and its relation to the music-dramatic work, five types of site-specific opera are proposed.

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Spaces and Places of Opera

Robert A. Baker

A matter of space

The masque, the Ballad Opera, *Singspiel*, semi-opera, melodrama, *opéra comique*, monodrama, operetta, musical theatre and music theatre – each opera-related genre suggests particular music-dramatic relationships and, since each belongs to a different historical period and geographical region, each is understood differently by its audience. Within these genres, conventions regarding the relationship of audience and performer vary greatly. The masque was intended to have trained actors and musicians supplemented by members of the royal court; consequently, the audience members for which the work was created were also intended to be participants in its production. In other types such as Ballad Opera and Singspiel, musical numbers were based on known folk tunes, with the implicit understanding that audience members would sing along, wholly unlike the grave silence expected of today's opera audiences, who are shrouded in darkness to the point in which they are visible neither to the singers nor to each other. But the differences between these genres can often be largely reducible to the different ways that they exploit space.

Two fundamental distinctions can immediately be made: *either* audience and performers share a collective space, allowing them to potentially interact in some way, *or* each is located in its own distinct space, with no admixture possible between the two. In the latter case, the space is divided into two, in the former, the space is undivided.

Of course this is far from exhaustive: other spaces also exist within the theatre. Invisible spaces may be suggested by actors or musicians off-stage to imply a far away place. Michael Issacharoff defines these and other spatial

dimensions as *dramatic spaces*, those which are created by the dramatist, of which there are two principal types: the first, *mimetic* space, is what is seen onstage (i.e. set, scenery, props and actions); the second, *diegetic* space, is that which is evoked in the mind of the spectator through text, or possibly music (i.e. the mention of another place, or the sounding of a musical motive associated with another place or person who is not present) (Issacharoff, 1981, p. 215). It is clear therefore, that the spatial dimensions in the theatre extend far beyond the visible boundaries of stage and theatre walls. But just how far do these spaces extend, and what are the ramifications of exploring these other vast spaces in the world of opera?

Expanding space

Advances in technology over the past century have enriched the combinatorial possibilities for the conjunction of art forms to create new operatic genres; chief among these is film. Perhaps the most cited example of the early use of film in opera is the film interlude in the second act of Berg's *Lulu* (1935). Yet, the lesser known opera, *Christoph Colomb* by Darius Milhaud, predates *Lulu* by five years with its use of film. Since then, the use of film in opera has increased exponentially.[1] The technology of film allows for the presentation of a visual element foreign to the place in which the opera is staged. Thus, the inclusion of film projection creates a space outside the conventional space of the theatre. This space fuses the mimetic (the visible space in which the performers exist) and the diegetic (the invisible elsewhere to which a portion of text or music refers), since film is both visible and spatially referent.[2] In this way, film provides a doorway through which new spaces can be accessed, and many artists have exploited these new spaces profitably.

1. Bernd Alois Zimmermann's 1965 *Die Soldaten* challenges audience perception with the multiple film segments running simultaneously on different screens.

2. Issacharoff addresses a similar issue inherent in the genre of radio play, whereby the absence of mimetic possibility is accounted for by certain sounds, or sound effects, which are designed to indicate the setting. For example, a background din and clinking tableware can provide the setting of a restaurant which a stage production would visually provide with the appropriate set–possibly including similar sound effects as well.

John Cage and the *Happening*

Coined by Allan Kaprow in the late 1950's, the term *happening* was used to describe an event in which a multitude of performances, in particular poetry reading, dance and music, take place in the same location and at the same time (historically, Allan Kaprow is considered to have presented the first *happening* in October 1959 at the Ruben Gallery with his *18 Happenings in Six Parts*). The spatial distinction between performers on stage and a seated audience was abandoned. The performers would be found throughout the theatre and amidst an audience free to circulate at will. This performer-audience relationship and somewhat free admixture of disparate art forms is not so distant from earlier music-dramatic types mentioned above.

One of John Cage's most significant happenings was *HPSCHD*.[3] Created in collaboration with Lejaren Hiller, this massive event was performed in the Assembly Hall of the University of Illinois in May 1969, and included seven harpsichords augmented through a myriad of computer-generated sounds and thousands of slides projected onto dozens of screens of huge proportions. The duration of the entire event exceeded five hours, during which audience members wandered freely throughout the performance space, and were expected to arrive and depart at any point within this time frame. Given the freedom with which audience members came and went, it was their length of stay within the performance space that determined the actual duration of the work for any particular audience member.

3. [Ed. note] A new recording of an excerpt of *HPSCHD*, performed by Robert Conant with electronics by Joel Chadabe, is available on the CD which accompanies *Musicworks*, nº. 98, 2000.

These events, which Cage likened to the atmosphere of the circus, raise important questions not only on the nature of space, but also of time. Since they have no pre-organised dramatic narrative, and many of their performed elements are often presented in random intervals and combinations determined by chance operations, these events take place *in the present*, without a storytelling element. This is a theatre of the *now*, and it is one which fundamentally questions our notions of both the passage of time and the nature of space. But can happenings be added to the above list of types of opera, alongside Singspiel, operetta and musical theatre? If we accept the definition of opera as a conjunction of art forms, involving music and some degree of the theatrical, then it would appear that a *happening* is as much opera as *Le Nozze di Figaro*.

Opera and Site

In the world of opera, theatrical spaces gradually expand until they burst beyond the boundaries of the theatre itself, and move outside the opera house to particular places or sites. These projects are *site-specific opera* – those music-dramatic works which are either composed for, or produced in (or both) a prescribed space other than that of the opera house. At this point, a more fundamental question is raised: if performed outside the opera house, where should an opera be performed, and why?

Five types of site-specific opera

Unifying opera and space

The third and final version of Beethoven's *Fidelio* was given at the Kärntnertortheater in 1814 Vienna. Nearly two hundred years later, in September 2005, the "Philly Fringe Festival" presented *Fidelio* in Pennsylvania's, now

decommissioned, Eastern State Penitentiary. Beethoven sets his opera in a "Spanish prison not far from Seville", while Eastern State Penitentiary is just outside Philadelphia and did not yet exist in 1814, although its construction was in the planning stages at that time and it housed its first inmate soon after that date, in 1829. Despite these slight 'inaccuracies', this production was produced on a site bearing obvious connections to Beethoven's work. This is a site-specific opera production of the first type: a work which was conceived for, and premiered in, the opera house, but subsequently produced in an alternate space which stands in for the work's dramatic setting. But what of a situation in which the site is not merely representational, but actually embodies the dramatic setting?

In December 1830 at Milan's Teatro Carcano, Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* was premiered. One hundred seventy five years later, this work was presented during the Tower of London Music Festival, in July 2005, within the walls of the infamous fortress. Unlike the aforementioned production of *Fidelio*, this *Anna Bolena* was given *at the very site of the dramatic setting*, upon the very spot of the real Queen's execution; the stage literally metres away from the Tower Chapel, resting place of the real decapitated Queen. This is an example of site-specific opera of the second type: a work which was conceived for, and premiered in, the opera house, but subsequently produced in an alternate space which *is* the work's dramatic setting.[4]

In productions of these types, the nature of the site actually brings together drama and setting in a way that the opera house can only represent. The two are unified into a performance space that adds a profound reality and weight to the spectator's experience. However, since Ann Boleyn was executed in 1536, the production cannot unite the drama and site with the dimension of time.[5] Nevertheless, the spectators' experience is potentially heightened and intensified due to being present in such significant surroundings; the audience is no longer entirely detached from the action, or protected from its subject matter by the safety of the rows of seats and an orchestra pit. In productions of this type, each spectator is in the space of the action *they are in the scene itself*.

The twentieth century has witnessed a veritable flowering of operas specifically composed for alternative spaces. Philip Glass' *1000 Airplanes on the Roof* is a work composed for a particular site that carries a metaphorical, or symbolic, association with the drama. Premiered at Vienna International Airport's Hangar No. 3 on 15 July 1988, the work, set in New York, centres on the character "M" and recent events involving his alien abduction and psychological difficulties upon returning to earth. Librettist David Henry Hwang

4. Other famous examples of this type are Verdi's *Aida* produced in October 2001 by Cairo Opera Company, performed at the pyramids of Giza; and, a more complex project, the Brian Large film of a production of Puccini's *Tosca* performed live in 1993 in the three sites in Rome specified in each act of the libretto. This live production was performed over the course of twenty-four hours by the Rome Radio and Television Orchestra and Chorus, conducted by Zubin Mehta, with Placido Domingo, Catherine Malfitano, Ruggero Raimondi, and directed by Giuseppe Patroni Griffi.

5. Likewise, Verdi's drama takes place in ancient Egypt during the time of the Pharaohs; *Tosca*'s political prisoner is in hiding in 1800 Rome.

states that the work is about the search for identity within all of us. Hwang strikes to the heart of this in his libretto with the following lines: "We are all visitors. We all travel. We all ask questions. We all hope one day, looking into the eyes of another, to find part of an answer." (Glass, Hwang, Sirlin, 1989, p. 48) These themes of visiting and travelling are obviously connected to the choice of site for this premiere, a space which facilitates exploration and travel, and is naturally concerned with matters of identity. In turn, the site not only reflects M's struggle with understanding what has happened to him – where he has been and who he is – but also the aliens' interest in the earth and humanity, and we may assume, themselves. This work is an example of site-specific opera of the third type: a work conceived for and premiered in an alternate space which is representative, or symbolic, of the work's dramatic setting.[6]

The patron saint of the Orkneys is the subject of Peter Maxwell Davies' opera *The Martyrdom of St. Magnus*. The work dramatises the betrayal and execution of Magnus by his brother in 12th century Scotland. Maxwell Davies conducted the premiere in St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, Scotland, in June 1977. The cathedral was erected in the former Earl of Orkney's territory, and is believed to be on the site of his remains. The surrounding area, and likely the site itself, actually *is* the place of the opera's setting, and thus illustrates the fourth type of site-specific opera: a work conceived for and premiered in an alternate space which *is* the work's dramatic setting.

6. Unlike most site-specific music theatre works, *1000 Airplanes* has toured since its site-specific premiere. However, the subsequent productions were given within conventional theatre spaces, no doubt for practical reasons. This fact has severe ramifications on the work's potential. Knowing as we do the circumstances of the premiere, the element and depth of the spatial dimensions in all post premiere performances is sadly diminished.

The Temporal Dimension

Despite the effective unification of drama and site in the above examples, the temporal dimension, even within the modern works, remains problematic. An alternate site may be able to bring together the setting of the drama and the place in which it is performed, but it cannot re-create the time of the dramatic setting. In the case of Davies' *Martyrdom* the setting is 12th century Scotland, and although performed in a relevant place, the time of the premiere performance was 1977. The time in which the audience receives the work is not equivalent to that of the dramatic setting. However, with Glass' *Airplanes*, set in the 'present', we come much closer to satisfying the temporal issue. There is a predominant hallucinogenic nature to the libretto, and therefore no conventional linear story. This would support a sort of timeless nature or a sense that the work is happening 'now' from the audience point of view, however there is an overall sense of order of events: M's life on a farm before his abduction and examination by extra-terrestrials, his return to earth, move to New York, and subsequent psychological difficulties in coming to terms

with his experience. These events carry a sense of multiple times, and suggest a linear understanding of M's story. Therefore, like *Martyrdom*, the audience's 'present' is not equivalent to M's various 'present's in the drama, and the time of the site (that is, the time in which the audience sits and the performance is given), is not yet entirely unified with the time of the work.

American Opera Projects (AOP), in New York, presented *Leaves of Grass* on 18 June 2005, in Brooklyn's Fort Greene Park. This production involved music, poetry reading and acting, and was created to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the publication of Walt Whitman's seminal collection of poems. Whitman lived and worked for some time in Brooklyn, and it was there that he published the first edition of his poems. Since the text contains no dramatic narrative, the setting for this work can be said to be in the 'now' of the performance – that is, in the time of both the site and the work.

AOP's *Leaves of Grass* certainly invites comparison to the happening, in the tradition of Cage and Kaprow, but the argument that this type of event is as operatic as any traditional example is supported by another recent work: R. Murray Schafer's *Patria 3: The Greatest Show*, the fourth in his twelve-part opera cycle collectively known as *Patria* (the first is entitled *Prologue*, followed by number one, two, three, etc.). Although two of the *Patria* works were composed for the theatre (*Patria 1: Wolfman*, and *Patria 2: Requiems for the Party Girl*), the remaining ten are site-specific works, mostly of the third type defined above. However, *The Greatest Show* stands out as another work that avoids a narrative structure and involves the audience in a highly interactive way. Premiered jointly in 1988 by Patria Music/Theatre Projects and the Peterborough Festival of the Arts, in Peterborough, Ontario, the work re-creates a town fair with one hundred individual circus-like acts. Audience members behave as one would at an actual fair by freely wandering from booths to entertainers, games to tents, interacting at will. A particularly deep level of interaction, however, is created with the addition of performances taking place within large tents, forcing the audience to make choices about what they might experience and what they may miss. However, admittance to any of these acts may only be gained if the audience member wins at certain games or other activities. The result of this multitude of performances and interactive possibilities is what Schafer considers to be two principal types of space: traditional theatre spaces (those in which an audience may sit silent and separated from performers) and elastic spaces (those in which audience members may come in contact with performers, both verbally and physically). These types of spatial environments are further enhanced by the fact that spectators engage and disengage themselves with each spatial type as

they move from one attraction to the next. Therefore *The Greatest Show* has the power to cause extremely different experiences from one audience member to another, and given its non-narrative combination of entertainments, it is also a work which occurs in the 'now' of the performance, site and audience.

Like the happening, *Leaves of Grass* and *The Greatest Show* occur both in the space and time of their respective sites, and in accordance with each spectator's individual perspective. Thus, the fifth and final type of site-specific opera encompasses works conceived for a specific site, with a non-narrative structure comprised of various independent artistic acts, which collectively take place in the 'now' of that site. Although these works may bear the loosest form of connection to the genre of opera, given their circus-like, non-narrative nature, they represent perhaps the truest possible form of site-specific opera: full unification of both the space and time of the site, with the work itself.

Afterthought

It is fitting that this trend of site-specific opera appears to continue to grow and flourish, now forty years after Boulez's mischievous and antagonistic proposal that all the world's opera houses be blown up (Boulez, 1968, p. 440). Even if Boulez did not mean that opera should simply be taken outdoors, nevertheless, it would appear that some tenuous balance between convention and Boulez's position is being explored.[7] In his essay "Theatre of Confluence II", Schafer evidently spoke not only for himself when he declared that we must strip down the walls of our senses, "We need to breathe clean air … For too long the clement temperatures of our theatres have neutralized our thermic sensibilities" (Schafer, 2002, p. 93).

7. Boulez was of course not objecting to the canon of opera repertoire, nor to the theatres themselves. Rather he was criticizing the institutions running opera houses, feeling that they no longer served the needs of contemporary composers interested in music-dramatic creation.

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