Negotiating Convention: Pop-Ups and Populism at the San Francisco Opera

MEGAN STEIGERWALD ILLE

Abstract
Twenty-first-century North American opera houses have attempted to bring in new audiences to make up for a declining and aging population of subscribers through means both traditional and unorthodox. The San Francisco Opera's SF Lab Initiative (2015–2018) was created with such goals in mind. Alternative forms of programming, which I categorize as auxiliary programming, have gained traction as a marketing and aesthetic strategy in recent years, and ultimately signal a dramatic shift in approaches to regional opera production in the United States. While scholars have explored the creation and funding of contemporary operatic productions in the United States, little attention has been given to forms of programming beyond the operatic mainstage. Using interviews with company members and analysis of advertising and reception of the events, I examine the SFO Lab programming as a site of negotiation between operatic convention and experimentation. Based on a populist vision of operatic access, the SF Opera Lab re-contextualized rather than eliminated class and intellectual hierarchies. More broadly, this application of experimental performativity contributes to discourses about Pan-American experimentalism(s) and demonstrates the ways in which a focus on local encounters can yield broad applications for genres and/or scenes beyond opera in the United States.

Twenty-first-century North American opera houses have attempted to bring in new audiences to make up for a declining and aging population of subscribers through means both traditional and unorthodox. The San Francisco Opera (SFO) is one such case in point.[1] These changes have taken place beyond the walls of the War Memorial Opera house, in nightclubs in the Bay Area as well as in the SFO's new performance space in the nearby Veterans Building. Recent programming interventions draw from performance and marketing techniques from the world of artist-driven experimental opera companies such as Los Angeles' The Industry, Toronto's Against the Grain, and larger companies like Beth Morrison Projects.[2]

[1] I traveled to San Francisco in August 2016 to conduct interviews with Elkhanah Pulitzer, then Artistic Curator of the SF Opera Lab, and Sean Waugh, Artistic Planning Manager of the SFO. I conducted phone interviews with César Cañon, Aria Umezawa, and four anonymous individuals. Waugh gave a follow-up interview (by phone) in March 2018.

[2] Following language used in promotional materials and interviews, I use the word "experimental" rather than "avant-garde" to describe the practices of the SFO and artist-driven companies from which these practices are adapted. While not within the scope of this article, the terms "avant-garde" and "experimental" have a fraught critical history. See Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L. Madrid, eds., *Experimentalisms in Practice: Music Perspectives from Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 4–5.

My main ethnographic collaborators at The Industry request that I capitalize "The" in the company's title, which I do throughout the article.

419

Does the use of experimental techniques borrowed from smaller companies disrupt social narratives of opera as an elitist or obsolete genre of performance in the twenty-first century in the United States, as the SFO suggests?[3] Or do these strategies signal towards rather than fulfill the promise of change?

Artist-driven, experimental, indie, or guerilla-style opera typically originates from the work of performers and directors who establish small companies with the goal of creating performance opportunities and pushing stylistic boundaries while introducing new audiences to opera.[4] Alternative opera companies might perform new or canonic works, produce site-specific or digitally mediated productions, and feature the work of established or little-known performers and directors. 2017 MacArthur Fellow Yuval Sharon and his experimental opera company The Industry represent one of the best-known alternative opera companies of the past ten years.[5] Another rich site of alternative operatic production can be found in Toronto, where eleven opera companies joined forces in 2016 to create the Indie Opera Collective.[6] While these are but two examples, alternative companies can be found in small and large urban centers across the United States and Canada.[7]

---

[3] Following a path trod by Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, Heather Wiebe interprets opera's obsolescence as a kind of invitation, suggesting that "[obsolescence] can also be an unbidden intrusion, provoking more open-ended meditations on a past that persists in bits and pieces, whose role in the present is unclear." Heather Wiebe, "A Note from the Guest Editor," *Opera Quarterly* 25, nos. 1–2 (Winter–Spring 2009): 3–5. James Steichen broadens the discussion of Wiebe and others by considering the implications of opera's "economic obsolescence" in "HD Opera: A Love/Hate Story," *Opera Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (Autumn 2011): 451–52. See also Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, *Opera's Second Death* (London: Routledge, 2002) and Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera* (New York City: W. W. Norton, 2015), 516–67.

[4] Tim Johnson-Rutherford understands the broad application of different approaches towards performance—be they musical, theatrical, technological, or otherwise—as emerging in the early 1970s and reflective of the "image problem" of new music specifically. See Johnson-Rutherford, *Music after the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture since 1989* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 22. Megan Steigerwald Ille provides an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of experimental opera in the twenty-first century United States and Canada, including sustained ethnographic analysis of the work of The Industry. See Megan Steigerwald Ille, "Bringing Down the House: Situating and Mediating Opera in the Twenty-First Century" (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2018).

[5] Other scholars who have worked on The Industry include Nina Eidsheim, whose work explores *Invisible Cities* from the perspective of acoustic and "live" sound. Nina Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015). See also Marianna Ritchey's *Composing Capital: Classical Music in the Neoliberal Era* for an alternate perspective on The Industry's production of *Hopscotch* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

[6] This collective includes members who originate from more-established companies, such as Against the Grain (which collaborates with the Canadian Opera Company), to smaller and more (literally) mobile companies such as the Bicycle Opera Project.

[7] A non-exhaustive list of experimental companies that incorporate alternative practices includes: Opera 5 (Toronto), Essential Opera (Toronto), Fawn Chamber Creative (Toronto), Liederwölfe (Toronto), Loose Tea Music Theatre (Toronto), MyOpera (Toronto), Ren:naissance (Toronto), Urban Vessel (Toronto), Tapestry Opera (Toronto), West Edge Opera (Berkeley), Opera on Tap (NYC), Rainy Park Opera (NYC/Digital), Loft Opera (now defunct, NYC), On Site Opera (NYC), the Atlanta Opera (Atlanta), Experiments in Opera (NYC), the Bicycle Opera Project (Ontario), Against the Grain Theatre (Toronto), ARE Opera (NYC), Heartbeat Opera (NYC), Gotham Chamber Opera (now defunct, NYC), Rhymes with Opera (NYC), The Industry (Los Angeles), Chicago Opera Theater (Chicago), Pocket Opera (San Francisco), and Beth Morrison Projects (multiple locations). From another angle, the *Indie Opera Podcast* produced by Peter Szep, Brooke Larimer, Walker Lewis, C. Colby Sachs, Ross Crean, and Noah Lethbridge has offered sixty episodes since 2011. While the *Indie Opera Podcast* focuses on works that are sometimes offered within traditional venues

For the majority of these companies, experimental practices are not limited to the stage alone, whether that stage is a limousine, on top of a building, or in an art gallery. Rather, these forms of performance often challenge traditional notions of spectatorship and operatic convention. This article explores the effects of mapping the "cottage industry" of small-scale opera—decentralized productions with often-reduced means of production support—onto the large-scale output of level-one opera houses.[8] What are the results of these "operatic experiments"? In other words, how might these attempts at experimentation re-inscribe canonic veneration and re-contextualize rather than eliminate class and intellectual hierarchies? This process of revisionism on the part of one of the United States' largest opera companies reveals the broader class and racial barriers that remain even as companies attempt to sell a fully accessible vision of opera as "American" art.

I understand experimentation as a range of discursive practices—often extra-musical—that interact with established institutions and repertories. This approach thus draws on Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L. Madrid's notion of experimentalisms as "a series of continuous presences that navigate fluidly in a transhistorical imaginary encounter of pasts and presents."[9] The transhistorical encounters staged by the SFO are those of presence and absence, reflecting the ways operatic conventions are both amplified and ignored by the programs I discuss. Thus, the SFO's efforts have wide-ranging effects on how opera-as-genre is understood and performed in the United States.[10] More broadly, this application of experimental performativity demonstrates the ways, following Alonso-Minutti, Herrera, and Madrid, in which a focus on local encounters can yield broad applications for genres and/or scenes beyond opera in the United States.

Attempts to bring in new audience members and shape larger narratives around North American operatic performance are not exclusive to the SFO. Educational, outreach, and promotional programs—what I call "auxiliary programming"—have long been a part of the institutional identity of the majority of opera companies in the United States and Canada. In the past ten years, however, these programs have taken on new institutional importance and represent the established opera industry's response to the increased visibility of experimental modes of production and site-specific performance. This new connection between auxiliary programming

rather than focusing exclusively on performances outside of the traditional space of the opera house, the podcast offers an excellent overview of the phenomenon from an insider-industry perspective. See "Indie Opera Podcast: The New Face of Opera," Homepage, last updated May 3, 2020, http://indieopera.com.

[8] OPERA America classifies member companies according to total annual budget. In 2017, level one companies have a budget of over \$15 million; level two companies have an annual budget between \$3 million and \$15 million; level three companies have an annual budget between \$1 million and \$3 million, level four companies have an annual budget between \$250,000 and \$1 million; and level five companies have an annual budget under \$250,000. OPERA America, *Opera America Annual Field Report 2017* (New York: OPERA America, 2018), https://operaamerica.org/files/oadocs/financials/FY16_AFR.pdf.

[9] Alonso-Minutti, Herrera, and Madrid, *Experimentalisms in Practice,* 2.

[10] This performative approach also incorporates Eric Drott's work on genre, in which genre is an unstable category which must be "enacted and reenacted." Eric Drott, "The End(s) of Genre," *Journal of Music Theory* 57, no. 1 (April 2013) 1–45.

and increased audiences is exemplified by OPERA America's "Building Opera Audiences" Grant program, funded by the Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation through the national non-profit OPERA America.[11] The program distributed $1.2 million to thirty-seven opera companies, including the SFO, from 2013 to 2016 to fund a range of auxiliary and experimental programming initiatives.

Despite their now-established presence as a part of an opera company's identity, scholars have given little attention to auxiliary forms of programming such as pop-up events, pastiche programs, and other forms of promotional performance in the operatic world. Considering these performances in the context of an opera company's broader identity reveals emerging artistic and community priorities. Because these projects are often small-scale and require less financial commitment, they also have the potential to forecast possible financial and programmatic directions a larger company might be considering. Finally, initiatives provide a contemporary rejoinder to discourses of low, middle, and highbrow culture from the early and mid-twentieth centuries in their preoccupation with navigating opera's "popular" image in the United States.[12]

My aims with this article are threefold. I highlight the ways in which non-mainstage programming has the potential to map a specific opera company within a local community. I then demonstrate the significance of this type of programming in understanding how the executives of a company enact and participate within a performative framework of opera in the United States. While a mainstage season may promote a certain image of opera, a company's auxiliary programming can direct and shape this image through other forms of programming, advertising, and outreach. Finally, I consider how this programming contributes to a larger discourse about access to the arts and the tension between populism and experimentation in the United States and in other parts of the Americas.

I use the SFO's opera lab series as a lens with which to explore the tensions inherent to a system of operatic marketing that uses traditional ideologies to promote new products and to sell conventional ideologies. More broadly, I analyze the fraught notion of a "populist" operatic aesthetic within the history of the SFO and within the current historical moment. That is, I consider how industry concerns over

---

[11] While the "Building Opera Audiences" program has now ended, a PDF that outlines the 2015 Grant Guidelines and Application Procedures outlines the goals of the program. "The Building Opera Audiences grant program assists the efforts of Professional Company Members (PCMs) to build audiences for opera through projects that lead to new and more frequent attendance at opera performances. Generously supported by the Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation, these one-year grants offer assistance for new initiatives and existing programs that cultivate new attendees, retain current or lapsed audiences, and foster deeper loyalty among existing patrons" OPERA America, "PDF: Building Opera Audiences 2015 Grant Guidelines and Application Procedures," November 5, 2014, https://operaamerica.org/Files/OADocs/GrantPDFs/GettyGuidelines15.pdf. Ongoing OPERA America grant programs can be accessed under "Grant Programs," OPERA America, https://www.operaamerica.org/content/about/grants.aspx.

[12] The scholarship on high-, middle-, and lowbrow culture is extensive. A selection includes: Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Ralph P. Locke, "Music Lovers, Patrons, and the 'Sacralization' of Culture in America," *19th-Century Music* 17, no, 2 (Autumn 1993): 149–73; and Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

opera as an inaccessible, elitist genre are mistranslated into a form of anti-intellectualism that reorganizes opera's perceived class hierarchies. Even as the SFO *signaled* a desire to dismantle these hierarchies through experimental programming and alternative venues, the company's actions (and financial obligations to the board of directors) prevented the company from doing more than gesturing towards change. This anti-intellectualism is framed as an embrace of "populist" programming as easy entertainment within the opera house and shaded by the inclusion of other social rituals like drinking during performances. The significance of neoliberal economic, cultural, and ideological concerns illustrated through this case study cuts across national borders and speaks to broader twentieth- and twenty-first century aesthetic and political practices and histories.

Rebranding Opera Through Auxiliary Programming

In the twenty-first century, artist training, educational outreach programs, and other performances that fall under the umbrella of auxiliary programming have become an integral element in the success of a large opera company in the United States.[13] In the process of translating experimental initiatives to regional opera houses, auxiliary operatic programming takes many forms. For example, offerings might occur in the appearance of flash mobs like Opera Philadelphia's Knight Foundation "Random Acts of Culture" collaborative performance of the "Halleluiah Chorus" at an area Macy's department store in 2010; productions at local cultural landmarks oriented towards new audiences such as the Chicago Lyric Opera's Unlimited *Rhoda and the Fossil Hunt* performed at the Field Museum in 2018; or pop-up events like the SF Opera Lab's juxtaposition of popular arias with invited DJs at popular nightclubs in the Bay Area.[14] Auxiliary initiatives thus encompass any type of programming meant to increase visibility of the opera company in the community or act as a catalyst for community-company interaction.

As exemplified by the SFO, auxiliary programming conveys a great deal about an opera company's identity and programming priorities. James Steichen refers to this notion of a company's public-facing identity as "institutional dramaturgy," which

---

[13] Examples of programs include the Metropolitan Opera's Lindemann Opera Program and Education programming, and Chicago Lyric Opera's Ryan Opera Center and Lyric Unlimited Division. See "2019–20 Lindemann Young Artist Development Program," Who We Are, Metropolitan Opera, https://www.metopera.org/about/who-we-are/lindemann-young-artist-development-program/#mainContent; and "The Patrick G. And Shirley W. Ryan Opera Center," Chicago Lyric Opera, https://www.lyricopera.org/ryanoperacenter/about.

[14] Museums, in particular, make for popular choices for outreach performances. *Rhoda and the Fossil Hunt* was a co-production produced with On Site Opera and Pittsburgh Opera and first performed in New York City's American Museum of Natural History in September and October 2017. See "On Site Opera: Productions," last updated 2019, https://osopera.org/productions/rhodafossil-hunt/. On Site Opera premiered *Murasaki's Moon* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in May 2019. See "On Site Opera: Past Productions," https://osopera.org/productions/murasakismoon/. Museums also have proved to be a fruitful space for site-specific opera performances as was the case with Opera Philadelphia's O17 and O18 Opera Festivals. The Barnes Foundation was used as a performance venue for *The Wake World* (2017) and *Glass Handel* (2018). The Philadelphia Museum of Art was used for the 2017 production *War Stories*.

he describes as the strategies an institution employs to "stage itself for the public."[15] An integral part of institutional health, auxiliary programming creates future opportunities for funding and publicity while "staging" this public identity.

Auxiliary programming is light on its feet and typically draws on institutional resources that are already available.[16] Thus, it can be a compelling means to not only shape institutional dramaturgy but also rebrand it through flexible, cheap means. Broadly speaking, opera's historical identity as an exclusionary, high-class art form in the United States has long established a fraught community legacy for companies struggling to draw in patrons.[17] Copious examples of opera-as-high-class lexicon in twentieth and twenty-first century public culture as discussed by Larry Hamberlin, Daniel Goldmark, and Jennifer Fleeger complicate this "branding challenge."[18] These discussions are compounded by the historical realities of segregation on the stage and in the audience of the US opera house as well as practices such as blackface that continue even to the present as discussed by Naomi André and Lucy Caplan.[19] Auxiliary programming that focuses on

[15] Steichen, "HD Opera: A Love/Hate Story," 446. See also "The Metropolitan Opera Goes Public: Peter Gelb and The Institutional Dramaturgy of *The Met: Live in HD*," *Music and the Moving Image* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 24–30.

[16] Both Steigerwald Ille and Ritchey explore the impact of site-specific operatic performance on the Los Angeles community of Boyle Heights: Steigerwald Ille, "Bringing Down the House," 181–93; Ritchey, *Composing Capital*, 90–113. Jen Harvie considers site-specific performance and experimental theater practices more broadly. Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance, and Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[17] See Levine on the changing perception of opera as exclusive art in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 100–4. Katherine Preston discusses mid-nineteenth century historical circumstances which cultivated this perception, including higher ticket prices, later start times, and new dress codes imposed at halls in the Academy of Music Philadelphia and Astor Place House New York City. Preston, "Between the Cracks: The Performance of English-Language Opera in Late Nineteenth-Century America," in "Nineteenth-Century Special Issue," ed. Katherine Preston and David Nicholls, special issue, *American Music* 21, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 350, 368.

[18] Daniel Goldmark writes about the ways Warner Brothers cartoons use symphonic music and opera as a marker of high-class status Goldmark, *Tunes for 'Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Larry Hamberlin approaches the question of opera and popular culture from another angle where he examines the circulation of operatic referents in early twentieth-century United States. Hamberlin, *Tin-Pan Opera: Operatic Novelty Songs in the Ragtime Era* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011). Jennifer Fleeger considers the role of "snipped and simplified" operatic excerpts in early US cinema in both bestowing cultural legitimacy and reinforcing the various identities of cinema-goers. Fleeger, *Sounding American: Hollywood, Opera, and Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 49.

[19] Naomi André argues for an analytic approach to operatic performance in the United States and South Africa that "incorporates how race, gender, sexuality, and nation help shape the analysis of opera today." André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 1. Lucy Caplan also considers the role of race and operatic performance from an American Studies perspective. Caplan, "High Culture on the Lower Frequencies: African Americans and Opera, 1900–1933" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2019). Clara Latham uses in part an intersectional approach to consider questions of racial representation on the operatic stage in Olga Neuwirth's *American Lulu*. Latham, "How Many Voices Can She Have?: Destabilizing Desire and Identification in *American Lulu*," *Opera Quarterly* 33, nos. 3–4 (Summer–Autumn 2017): 303–18. While focused on a considerably earlier historical period, Katherine Preston considers the role of English-language opera as a form of popular culture in the nineteenth-century United States. Preston, *Opera for the People: English-Language Opera and Women Managers in Late 19th-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). Finally, both Bruce A. McConachie and Peter Geo Buckley explore the role

education and access can be read as one broad response to this problematic cultural legacy.[20]

The community-company relationship exemplified by auxiliary programming is facilitated through a variety of means. For example, Houston Grand Opera's (HGO) "HGOco" Initiative works to make connections between the opera company and its surrounding community. The HGOco landing page features racially diverse audiences and performers. The page gives information about attending student performances of not only *Rigoletto* but also composer Javier Martínez's *El Milagro del Recuerdo*. The latter is a sequel to the company's 2018 mariachi opera *Cruzar la Cara de la Luna* about an immigrant family divided between the US–Mexican border written by Martínez's father, José "Pepe" Martínez. Taken in its entirety, the promotional HGOco homepage then suggests student-targeted events that thematically reflect the makeup of Houston's community (or at least a projection of the community) and a desire to create art that speaks to contemporary concerns.[21] Closer to home, Opera at the Ballpark, the SFO's annual collaboration with the San Francisco Giants, attracted twenty-eight thousand and twenty-six thousand attendees in the 2015 and 2016 fiscal years, respectively, and represents a major outreach effort on the part of the opera company.[22] This event uses a large space—Oracle Park—to offer free simulcasts of performances happening at the War Memorial Opera House.[23]

of the Astor Place Riot in shaping perceptions of operagoing in nineteenth-century New York City. See McConachie, "New York Operagoing, 1825–50: Creating an Elite Social Ritual," *American Music* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 181–92 and Buckley, "To the Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820–1860" (PhD diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1984).

[20] Opera's historical branding crisis was made more urgent by funding crises in the arts that intensified after the 2008 Great Recession. Companies' increased emphases on community engagement and accessibility could be interpreted as one response to this financial crisis. A cursory overview of this shift towards civic accessibility, community collaboration, and racial, ethnic, and gender diversity and inclusivity is exemplified in a comparison of OPERA America conference themes from 2002 to 2018. See "Opera Conference: 50th Annual," National Opera America Center, https://www.operaamerica.org/Content/About/conference.aspx. Pre-2009 conference themes do touch on the continuing relevance of the genre; however, the majority of post-2008 themes emphasize the contemporary relevance of opera, the need to develop new audiences, and shift towards increased local participation, all company goals often served in part by auxiliary programming. For more information on the effects of the 2008 Recession on the arts, see Americans for the Arts, *Arts and Economic Prosperity IV: Summary Report* (Washington, DC: Americans for the Arts, 2012), https://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/pdf/information_services/research/services/economic_impact/aepiv//AEP4_NationalSummaryReport.pdf.

[21] "About HGOCo," Houston Grand Opera, https://www.houstongrandopera.org/community-programs/about-hgoco.

[22] The SFO's IRS Form 990 from 2015 (accessible through a free account in www.guidestar.org, San Francisco Opera Association, Form 990 Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax, Part III line 4b, 2015 and 2016) also mentions a range of other "educational performances, workshops/training programs for teachers and adults and opera study clubs," which reached "thousands of individuals."

[23] The SFO also offers a range of workshops and educational days for families. Recent workshops have included "The Magic Flute Adventure," "All About Carmen," and a range of educational initiatives connected to the SF Opera Guild's 2018–2019 "Year of the Hero." See "San Francisco Opera Guild Education Programs 2018–2019: The Year of the Hero" Brochure. This brochure is no longer available on the SFO's website. The current brochure, "San Francisco Opera Guild Education Programs 2019–

This cursory survey demonstrates a range of programming initiatives that convey different priorities and public images for each respective opera company. For example, the HGOco initiative communicates, among other things, the HGO's desire to create stories that may resound with Houston's large Latinx and immigrant community and contemporary political concerns over human rights and migration. SFO's Opera at the Ballpark collaboration uses a central community space to stage a simulcast in a more accessible and uniquely visible environment than the opera house. Theoretically, the change of venue and mode of presentation targets the more socioeconomically and racially diverse fan base of the Giants (in comparison to those attendees at the War Memorial Opera House).

From another angle, these supplementary forms of operatic programming—this "need" for a new and improved institutional dramaturgy—can be interpreted as a response to the values of musical entrepreneurialism vaunted by US conservatory programs and contemporary music ecosystems as recognized by multiple scholars.[24] As has been shown, twenty-first century forms of musical entrepreneurialism are impossible to disentangle from neoliberal ideologies and economics. By extension, auxiliary programming should be interpreted through a lens of entrepreneurially-driven forms of production and consumption. In fact, the proliferation of these programs at opera companies across the United States and Canada during the 2013–2016 "Building Opera Audiences" funding cycle demonstrates that while traditional funding structures remain in place as a fundamental way of supporting North American opera, the way these structures are employed has changed. Twenty-first century ancillary programs thus represent the result of a transformation of traditional funding structures (i.e., granting agencies and individual cultural patrons) into neoliberal economic strategy and product. Put another way, grant programs like "Building Opera Audiences" become an institutionalized way in which older systems of collective support (grant programs) participate in their own process of de-regulation through a process of validating the entrepreneurial enterprise of individual opera companies. As Andrea Moore points out, neoliberalism's projects of de-regulation and "commodification" are especially salient applications of neoliberalism within the classical music industry.[25] Auxiliary operatic programs

---

2020: The Year of Reflection," can be found under "Book to Bravo: Learn More," San Francisco Opera School Programs, https://sfopera.com/discover-opera/education/schools/book-to-bravo/.

[24] Recent scholarship exploring the positioning, production, and consumption of "new" music has emphasized how neoliberalism has unduly influenced the ways western classical music is produced and sold in the United States. See Ritchey's *Composing Capital* and "'Amazing Together': Mason Bates, Classical Music, and Neoliberal Values," *Music and Politics* 9, no. 2 (Summer 2017): http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0011.202.; Yi Hong Sim, "Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and the Avant-Garde: The Significance of New Music Practice in a Revised Temporality of Class-Based Resistance" (paper presented at the 2nd Biennial Conference on Musicology and the Present, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Bezanson Auditorium, September 17–18, 2016); Andrea Moore, "Neoliberalism and the Musical Entrepreneur," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 10, no. 1 (2016): 33–53; and Will Robin, "Balance Problems: Neoliberalism and New Music in the American University and Ensemble," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 71, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 749–93. See also Timothy Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

[25] Moore relies on the work of economist Guy Standing to illustrate the "four fundamental features of the neoliberal project: liberalization . . . individualization, commodification, and fiscal retrenchment."

like those employed by the SFO, which have a light economic footprint and rely on the efforts of a few precariously employed individuals within the opera industry, represent one of the ways in which the tenets of neoliberalism have transformed the marketing and production of opera in the twenty-first century.

Engaging the Opera-Curious: The Lab

The SFO's new auxiliary programming stream took the form of two overlapping initiatives described both individually and collectively as the SF Opera Lab. Located at 401 Van Ness Avenue, the Diane B. Wilsey Center for Opera can be found on the fourth floor of the Veteran's Building.[26] Beginning in March 2016, the center's first of two auxiliary programming initiatives took the form of chamber performances, new works, and collaborations between established ensembles or companies. Pop-up events, the second of these two initiatives, consisted of multiple nightclub-based performances of operatic highlights often with other stereotypical signifiers.

From its inception, the Wilsey Center for Opera was meant to satisfy multiple needs of the company. The venue would provide centralized rehearsal spaces, an archival center, much-needed office space, and ultimately a theater that would allow the company to offer year-round performances: the Taube Atrium Theater. The SFO shares the War Memorial Opera house with the San Francisco Ballet, meaning no main stage performances are given by the SFO from January to May, although there is a second short season of operas in June. Thus, Wilsey Center performances were originally intended for subscribers and high-level donors in the SFO's off season—not opera for the opera "curious," as new-to-opera patrons are called by the company, but rather for the initiated aesthete.[27] Once Elkhanah Pulitzer was hired as artistic curator of the space in early 2016, the imagined audience for the new space shifted. Pulitzer's background in directing experimental productions with the company West Edge Opera, combined with what the SFO

She notes that "Of these four features, commodification and the curbing of collectivity are especially resonant with the financial problems facing classical music culture, whose primary 'products' . . . have never fared well on the open market, historically relying on subsidy, patronage, and other forms of largely voluntary largesse instead." See Moore, "Neoliberalism and the Musical Entrepreneur," 36.

[26] The Veteran's Building is just adjacent to the War Memorial Opera House and, until September 1994, was the location of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. While the building is still owned by the War Memorial Board of Trustees, the SFO rents the space and has up to twenty-six weeks of access to the Atrium Theater and Education Studio per year. The twenty-one-million-dollar renovation of the space began in 2011 and was completed in late 2015. "Our History," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, https://www.sfmoma.org/read/our-history/ . In a phone conversation with the author on April 8, 2019, Stephanie Smith indicated that the War Memorial Board of Trustees is made up of mayor-appointed representatives of the city and county of San Francisco. For additional information on the construction process and original goals of the Wilsey Center, see Jane Ganahl, "Diane B. Wilsey Center for Opera: A Dream Come True," San Francisco Opera, https://sfopera.com/about-us/diane-b.-wilsey-center-for-opera/a-dream-come-true/. Additional funding information can be found in the SFO's IRS Form 990 from FY 2010 to FY 2016 at www.guidestar.org.

[27] The phrase "opera curious" came up multiple times in my conversation with Waugh and Pulitzer (Elkhanah Pulitzer and Sean Waugh, interview by author, August 24, 2016). "Opera curious" is also used multiple times in the SFO's advertising for specific productions or pop-ups. See, for example, "SF Opera Lab Pop-Up @ OASIS: Halloween Edition," San Francisco Opera, https://sfopera.com/sfoperalab/season-two/sf-opera-lab-pop-up/. The phrase was used for a limited time in connection with the SFO's "Opera Overtures" series, but as of May 2019, it no longer appears in current advertising.

observed as the emerging "trend" of experimental opera, suggested a different direction for the space. As Sean Waugh, Artistic Planning Manager at the SFO, explained:

> We started to ask how we could think of [the Wilsey space] a little differently. Let's look at what other companies are doing, what LA Opera is doing with their Off Grand Series, look what Houston is doing with their Houston Grand Opera Co initiative . . . look at what Beth Morrison Projects is doing, look at how people are starting to pick [experimental productions] up and make that more mainstream. This is the direction we *need* to go. And the [Wilsey Center] is an opportunity here.[28]

Waugh equates the growing trend of alternative forms of presentation undertaken by regional opera houses and artist-driven companies with two outcomes: one, making experimental programming more "mainstream"; and, two, increased interest from new audiences. What this quote does not reveal is what exactly "experimental" might mean in the context of the SFO.

Waugh is not alone in touting the power of alternative forms of presentation to draw in new audiences. In a 2016 *New York Times* article, then-General Director David Gockley argued that the SF Opera Lab would "allow [the SFO] to engage in this new wave of chamber opera that has really kind of come out of nowhere in the last decade, and is a very important part of our art form these days."[29] Sasha Metcalf, however, notes that a belief in experimental practices to draw in new audiences is not new to the twenty-first century.[30] In fact, both Waugh and Gockley's statements reflect concerns expressed by OPERA America members in the latter decades of the twentieth century.[31] As Metcalf describes, in the 1980s executives such as Gockley (then General Director of the HGO) and Harvey Lichtenstein (President and CEO of the Brooklyn Academy of Music) "believed [Philip] Glass's synthesis of avant-garde and popular-music traditions attracted younger audiences and led to sold-out performances."[32] In the twenty-first century, the SFO had faith in seemingly "edgy" performance formats to do the same. As we will see, however, the company's belief in the signaling power of experimentation

---

[28] Pulitzer and Waugh, interview. Waugh refers to the Houston Grand Opera's community initiative that I describe earlier in the article. LA Opera's Off Grand series and collaboration with Beth Morrison Projects (BPM) at REDCAT is a programming venture that allows BMP and LA Opera to collaborate on projects. The competition between SFO and BMP was particularly acute in 2019 after the latter company had recently produced two Pulitzer-winning operas, Ellen Reid's *p r i s m* in 2019 and Du Yun's *Angel's Bone* in 2017. For more on the Off Grand/REDCAT collaboration, see Ryan Ebright, "Incubating American 'Opera-Theater': Beth Morrison Projects, Los Angeles Opera, and Missy Mazzoli's *Song from the Uproar*" (paper given at the Forty-Fourth Annual Meeting of the Society for American Music, March 3, 2018). The now defunct Gotham Chamber Opera ran seasons out of New York City from 2001 to 2015 and focused on works "intended for intimate venues." See "History," Gotham Chamber Opera, http://www.gothamchamberopera.org/history.

[29] Michael Cooper, "San Francisco Joins the Growing World of Small Operas," *New York Times,* April 1, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/02/arts/music/san-francisco-joins-the-growing-world-of-small-operas.html.

[30] See Sasha Metcalf, "Institutions and Patrons in American Opera: The Reception of Philip Glass, 1976–1992" (PhD diss., University of California at Santa Barbara, 2015).

[31] Sasha Metcalf, "Funding 'Opera for the 80s and Beyond': The Role of Impresarios in Creating a New American Repertoire," *American Music* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 7–28.

[32] Metcalf, "Funding 'Opera for the 80s and Beyond," 8.

was oftentimes in direct conflict with notions of what repertoire would be universally appealing to new audiences.[33]

What exactly constitutes an experimental opera performance or form of auxiliary programming in the context of the SFO? Moreover, how different is an "experimental" work from a "new opera"?[34] The fraught notion of experimentalism is at the crux of the SF Opera Lab initiative. From the above comments, it seems "experimental" signifies multiple characteristics, many of which are not musical. While the word might refer to musical practices (and experimental musical practices can be a part of these works), more often, the phrase describes a scene that serves an explicitly social or political critique, such as Roxie Perkins and Ellen Reid's *p r i s m* (BMP, 2018). Experimentalism can also encompass practices of spectatorship: for example, a production that incorporates novel forms of digital mediation, such as Adam Taylor and Scott Joiner's 2016 *Connection Lost: L'opera di Tinder* or The Industry's 2015 *Hopscotch*. Finally, works given in alternative or site-specific locations, such as Tom Philpott and Tom Cipullo's *Glory Denied* (HGOco, 2017), would fit the SFO's definition of experimental works. This constellation of behaviors and practices constituting experimental opera is, following Eduardo Herrera's terminology, an "indexical cluster . . . a grouping that through repetition and redundancy becomes habitually and most strongly connected to other signs within specific groups of people."[35] In this system of signification, "new operas" can certainly be experimental—and might even be more musically "daring"—but would more likely be produced within a traditional proscenium framework and perhaps by larger, longer-established companies such as the HGO.

By this logic, a premiere such as the SFO's 2017 production of Peter Sellars's and John Adams's *Girls of the Golden West* would be an example of new opera, while the same production with a reduced cast, more explicit political critique (and perhaps some sort of digital media component), given within the Wilsey space, would constitute an "experimental" work. Theoretically, moving this kind of opera to the alternative spaces described by Gockley, Pulitzer, and Waugh allows for a shift in appeal along with categorization. The conflation of place, spectatorship, and political narrative with the word "experimental" is not exclusive to the SFO. Associating this indexical cluster with the ability to attract new audience members is common among recipients of the Building Opera Audiences grants. "Experimental," thus,

---

[33] As an anonymous PR consultant for various regional opera companies around the United States pointed out to me on May 22, 2019, the other substantial concern for any US-based opera company is supporting the needs of existing subscribers and donors, which might be more traditional with regards to repertoire. "This group of opera-attendees might be aging," she said, "but they aren't gone!"

[34] While different from the situation of new versus experimental opera, Will Robin's exploration of the consequences of categorizing a music scene offers a broad perspective on the significance of categorization and rhetoric within the contemporary classical music industry. See Robin, "The Rise and Fall of 'Indie Classical': Tracing a Controversial Term in Twenty-First Century New Music," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 12, no. 1 (2018): 55–88.

[35] Eduardo Herrera, "'That's Not Something to Show in a Concert': Experimentation and Legitimacy at the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales," in *Experimentalisms in Practice: Music Perspectives from Latin America*, ed. Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L. Madrid, 22 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

indicates not just a set of practices but also acts as a rhetorical signal that amplifies the marketing allure of these practices.

In the lexicon of twenty-first-century US-American opera, it might be said that any event that does not appear in the large performance space of the opera house seems to be implicitly experimental and alluring. The following exchange between Waugh and Pulitzer reveals this focus on the work of experimental companies:

WAUGH: I remember when I first started working here, [alternative] companies were seen as "oh well, they're doing crazy stuff, we don't want to do that." And now we're a company that is saying "wow! We want to work with them!" or "wow, they're doing some really cool stuff, and let's find a way to do that too." It's a big shift.

PULITZER: That comes back to the relevance question—the big-scale houses are dealing with a changing audience, and I think a lot of organizations are wanting to experiment with what that future looks like—the different ways in which to engage with an audience.[36]

The above conversation foregrounds the connection between experimental programming and the relevance of opera as a viable art form in the United States. Notably, the definition of experimental programming encompasses not only practices contained behind the fourth wall but also those performative experiments which, in Pulitzer's words, "engage" the audience in a different way. Performance space is a key indicator of these new forms of engagement.

Besides Waugh and Pulitzer, other forms of SFO advertising emphasized the role of the Wilsey Center as a "research and development" space for presumably the mainstage.[37] For example, a blog published by the SFO in early 2017 was titled "SF Opera Lab—The Many Faces of R&D."[38] In the article, the first season of the Wilsey Center is referred to by Pulitzer as a series of "experiments." She concludes by once more referring to the lab as a research and development (R&D) branch of the SFO and optimistically states that in this role the lab will continue "figuring things out." While the emphasis on R&D could be a rhetorical attempt to appeal to tech interests within San Francisco, it is worth considering the implications of Pulitzer's writing in this article. If the lab is an R&D space, how will the operas or "products" developed in the lab make it to the "market" of the mainstage? Perhaps the targets of the R&D component of SF Opera Lab programming were not operas but rather audience members, in which case this strategy echoes the

---

[36] Pulitzer and Waugh, interview.

[37] The use of terminology and experimental structures borrowed from scientific research with regards to aesthetic experimentation is not new to the SFO. For example, Herrera explores the Laboratorio de Música Electrónica in Buenos Aires in the 1960s, indicating "the use of the word *laboratorio* was not coincidental; the whole studio was frequently referred to using metaphors originated in the scientific world, which further corroborates the idea of experimentation" (Herrera, "'That's Not Something to Show at a Concert,'" 24). In the shadow of Silicon Valley, I would add that this emphasis on scientific terminology is further complicated by the ubiquitous presence of start-up culture in multiple forms.

[38] "SF Opera Lab: The Many Faces of R&D," San Francisco Opera Blog, San Francisco Opera, https://sfopera.com/blog/sf-opera-lab---the-many-faces-of-rd/.

marketing strategies of social-media companies like Facebook who target user information over content.[39] This line of inquiry is in fact supported by commentary made by an anonymous SFO employee involved with the pop-ups. In our conversation on March 3, 2019, they mentioned that it was only during the final pop-up that the company began seeing more engagement between the SFO and pop-up attendees. "Rather than trying to capture people's data," they explained, "we started to look at what we were doing to follow up [with audience members]." This comment reveals two important facts about the reality of the SF Opera Lab programming. First of all, research was being done on attendees (a standard practice for many opera companies). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the SFO was unsure how to best leverage this R&D process, regardless of target.

Whether user or platform oriented, the R&D portion of the lab was supplemented by a partnership with other marketing resources from the beginning of the initiative. The first opera pop-up was a result of a collaboration with the Stanford d.school and intended as a prototype event for future Wilsey Center programming.[40] This performance, however, was so well received that the company began offering pop-ups as recurring performances. The Wilsey space was named the SF Opera Lab, and the pop-ups were intended to work as feeder events that would draw new audiences to the lab, supporting the notion of the lab being an R&D space for consumers. It was the hope of the SFO marketing team that in the future these same opera-curious attendees would eventually be converted into mainstage subscribers.

The SF Opera Lab produced two seasons in the spring of 2016 and 2017. Typical seasons were made up of two productions and one recital or ensemble performance, following Gockley's requirement that performances incorporate both "theatrical" and "vocal aspects."[41] For example, the first season, which ran from April 2 to April 23, 2016, was made up of *Svadba-Wedding*, *The Triplets of Belleville* Cine-Concert, and two ChamberWORKS recitals featuring SFO orchestral performers.[42] In the second season, the Wilsey Center took on the role of both presenter and producer. The second season ran from February 24 to April 23, 2017 with

---

[39] I am grateful to Ryan Ebright for suggesting the possibility that the SF Opera lab was oriented towards consumer rather than opera development.

[40] The Stanford d.school pioneered the concept of design thinking. The collaboration between the SFO and the d.school is especially notable because of the latter's deep commitment to neoliberal values. See David Hoyt and Robert L. Sutton, "What Design Thinking is Doing for the San Francisco Opera," *Harvard Business Review*, June 3, 2016, https://hbr.org/2016/06/what-design-thinking-is-doing-for-the-san-francisco-opera.

[41] After serving in the role from 2006 onward, David Gockley retired from his role as General Director of the SFO in 2016. For an overview of Gockley's career highlights, see Michael Cooper, "In San Francisco, Opera Impresario David Gockley Hangs up his Cloak," *New York Times*, June 22, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/26/arts/music/david-gockley-opera-impresario-hangs-up-his-cloak.html. For a scholarly perspective on Gockley's contributions to operatic production in the United States, see Metcalf, "Funding 'Opera for the 80s and Beyond" and "Institutions and Patrons in American Opera: The Reception of Philip Glass, 1976–1992."

[42] A performance of Schubert's *Winterreise* also took place but was not listed within the official season lineup.

performances of Beth Morrison Projects' digital oratorio *The Source* by Ted Hearne, *La Voix humaine*, and a one-night performance by Roomful of Teeth.[43]

The Wilsey space can be configured in multiple ways: audience members might be seated in the round around a large circular stage with tables and chairs clustered within the space as they were for Ana Sokolovic's *Svadba-Wedding*. The space could also be adjusted to allow for multiple-aisle-style seating.[44] All performances offered the opportunity to purchase beverages at the bar and to bring those drinks into the performance space; a press release regarding the center mentions the crucial detail of cup holders next to each seat.[45] In contrast to other forms of experimental operatic performance, the audience was seated and in one contained space the entire time. Additionally, they were not directed to interact in any specific ways that challenged notions of spectatorship. Even this overview of the 2016 and 2017 seasons demonstrates the flexible ways in which the draw of the "experimental" was used by the company.

"Opera Singers: They're Just Like Us!" The Pop-Ups

The pop-up opera events were held from March 2015 to November 2017 and then again in September 2018.[46] Provocatively titled "Barely Opera," the first event was held at the Rickshaw Stop, a music venue and bar in March 2015. "This isn't your grandmother's opera!," proclaimed the slogan for the night. A live DJ, drinks, and a huge "Wheel of *Songs*" (not arias) that audience members could spin to select the next piece to be sung provided further evidence that this was a different sort of opera event altogether. Rather than relying on supertitles or translations, the SFO's Adler Fellows performed each aria or duet with memes providing translations ("supermemes" rather than supertitles), which illustrated the text appearing on a screen behind them (Figure 1).[47]

---

[43] ChamberWORKS recitals were also performed in season two. No official Wilsey Center chamber operas were held in 2018 or in 2019. Public links to the second season of San Francisco Opera Lab are no longer available; however, a box office agent at the SFO directed me to the following on the Internet Archive: https://web.archive.org/web/20161103085403/sfopera.com/operalab.

[44] The growing popularity of flexible, alternative performance spaces such as the Wilsey Center can be seen in the openings of spaces such as The Shed, designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro (lead architect) and Rockwell Group (collaborating architect), which opened in Hudson Yards, Manhattan, in April 2019. See "What is The Shed?" The Shed, https://theshed.org. Demonstrating an interest in site-specific operatic experiences, Diller Scofidio + Renfro were also the impresarios behind the production of David Lang's *The Mile-Long Opera* in fall 2018.

[45] This kind of black-box-inspired setup can be associated with the efforts of Beth Morrison Projects.

[46] Sean Waugh, interview by author via phone, March 19, 2018. Grant distribution amounts for the 2016–2017 funding cycle were shared with me by Claire Gohorel (Gohorel, email message to author, March 26, 2018. From Fall 2016 to Spring 2017, these events were funded by a $30,000 "Building Opera Audiences" grant from Opera America.

[47] Multiple participants, including Adler Fellows César Cañón (2018–2019) and Aria Umezawa (2017–2018), explained the "supermeme" choice to me. César Cañón, phone interview with author, April 8, 2019. Aria Umezawa, phone interview with author, February 26, 2019. The Adler Fellowships are "multi-year performance-oriented residencies for opera's most promising young artists." Performers are drawn from the SF's Opera Center Merola program for a yearlong renewable residency. For more on the Adler Fellowships, see "Adler Fellowship Program," San Francisco Opera Association, https://sfopera.com/about-us/opera-center/adler-fellowship-program/.

Figure 1. Mezzo-Soprano Zanda Švēde sings "Que fait-tu blanche tourterelle" from Gounod's *Romeo et Juliette*, as the "supermeme" image provides a translation to spectators. Photo Credit: Karla Monterroso.

Since the initial prototype event, SFO produced six more pop-ups at various clubs and bars in San Francisco and Oakland and two additional "Meet the Adler" events (Figure 2).

A short promotional video advertising future pop-ups using footage from the February 11, 2016 event at Public Works positions the event as hip, intimate, and inviting. The video shows Adler-fellow Toni Marie Palmertree singing Wagner's "Dich, teure halle" from *Tannhäuser* into a microphone to a packed room with people in their twenties and thirties holding drinks. The film then shifts to footage of (primarily) millennials posing with Ring Cycle–inspired props in front of a photo booth and includes interviews with spectators. "I wouldn't say it felt like I was at the opera. It felt like a really big party with people performing their favorite songs," one woman explained. Countering another operatic stereotype, a second attendee related that "you can enjoy the music without having to feel like you are in a stiff environment."[48] "Favorite songs" performed by Adler fellows at the pop-ups tend to be canonic arias and duets. For example, in a YouTube video created by

---

[48] Video found on San Francisco Opera "SF Opera Lab: Pop-Up Operatronica," last modified October 2017, https://sfopera.com/sfoperalab/fall-2017/pop-up/.

Date	Theme	Location	Distance from War Memorial Opera House
March 2015	"Barely Opera"	Rickshaw Stop	0.7 miles
February 2016	N/A	Public Works	1.2 miles
April 2016	N/A	The Chapel	1.8 miles
October 2016	"Halloween Edition"	Oasis	0.9 miles
March 2017	"Oakland Edition"	Uptown Nightclub	10.4 miles
October 2017	"Operatronica"	Mezzanine SF	1.2 miles
February 2018	"Get to Know the Adlers:" Opera Unmasked	Mr. Tipple's	0.6 miles
September 2018	"Battle of the Divas"	The Great Northern	1.3 miles
November 2018	"Meet the Adlers: Unmasked	Piano Fight	0.9 miles

Figure 2.   SF Opera Lab Pop-Ups and Adler Events.

2015–2017 Adler-fellow Anthony Reed, problematically titled "Opera in da Club," Reed and Adler directing fellow Aria Umezawa discuss repertoire for an upcoming pop-up.[49] Repertoire discussed includes "Non più andrai" (*Le Nozze di Figaro,* Mozart), "La calunnia" (*Il Barbiere di Siviglia,* Rossini), "O namenlöse freude" (*Fidelio,* Beethoven), and "Sempre libera" (*La Traviata,* Verdi).[50]

Although traditional repertoire dominates the opera pop-ups, the events are marketed by the *suggestion* of other musical genres through multiple means. Audience members are encouraged to cheer at high notes and clap boisterously at the often-campy antics of performers. Rhetorical suggestions of other genres also abound. For example, "Operatronica" was an Electronic Dance Music (EDM)-inspired Pop-Up held at the nightclub Mezzanine on October 12, 2017.[51] As described in the

---

[49] Reed's video title is an allusion to Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson's song, "In Da Club." My BASSic Life, "Opera in da Club," October 17 2017, YouTube video, 8:50, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQCZH4mXoLs. The troubling racial implications of Reed's title speak to larger issues of the appropriation of Black culture. See Ingrid Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 396–422. See also Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice* 20, no 1 (Spring–Summer 1993): 104–14 and Joel Dinerstein, *The Origins of Cool in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

[50] "Opera in da Club," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQCZH4mXoLs.

[51] Mezzanine, "About," last modified March 2018, https://mezzaninesf.com/contact/about/.

promotional materials, DJ Troupe Loves Company was hired to "bring the beats for an opera party like no other."[52] Tickets were $20 in advance, $25 at the door, and $40 for VIP access, which included the option to purchase bottle service and reserved seating, VIP entry, a meet-and-greet with the singers, and a swag bag.[53] A section on the website advertising the event read, "Who's gonna love it: The Opera Curious, EDM fans and those who enjoy the VIP treatment." Interspersed with traditional repertoire, Umezawa performed Menotti's "The Seventh Glass of Wine" on a vocoder, and Adler-Fellows Amitai and Pene Pati played The Zuton's "Valerie" while accompanying themselves on guitar. As Pulitzer and Waugh described in our 2016 interview, the move away from rhetorical operatic signifiers is a deliberate component of SF Opera Lab marketing strategy. Part of the goal of the Lab, according to Waugh, is to "break down the perceptual barriers of opera to people who, right now, say opera isn't for me."[54] He continued, "The measure of success should be really when that user leaves that [operatic] experience that their positivity levels, if you measure it in the sense of brand positivity, the word opera to them has a little less of a negative connotation than what it had before they came."[55] This comment reduces an operatic experience to a commodity, which in turn implies a form of standardization, cogent signifiers that will sell "opera" consistently. This "brand" depends on an array of canonic markers, operatic stereotypes, and signifiers of social capital. Well-known arias are performed, and audiences are given the "VIP treatment" in attending the pop-ups.

An integral element of the pop-ups is the way the events depict performers as relatable. Both Waugh and Umezawa emphasized the importance of the Adler fellows drinking and mingling with audience members during performances. Waugh explained: "There is no backstage" and "we want [the performers] to go back in the crowd, to hang out with people, talk to them."[56] As many pop-up attendees have indicated, these behaviors have had the effect of humanizing performers for those unfamiliar with opera. Waugh confided that "a pop-up attendee shared that one of the most powerful moments was seeing this bass-baritone get up and belt out and sing the shit out of this incredibly powerful aria, and then go back out and dance to Beyoncé on the dance floor."[57] These events are successful partially because of the way they juxtapose operatic stereotypes with elements that counter these stereotypes. In Umezawa's words, "we needed to humanize the singers . . . opera singers, they're just like us! Let them be seen drinking a beer or dancing really

[52] San Francisco Opera, "SF Opera Lab: Pop-Up: Operatronica."
[53] San Francisco Opera, "SF Opera Lab: Pop-Up: Operatronica."
[54] Waugh, interview.
[55] Pulitzer and Waugh, interview.
[56] Waugh, interview.
[57] When I asked Waugh if the microphones were symbolically significant during events (they are a practical necessity given nightclub acoustics), he conjectured that for a person "that has only been to a rock, pop, or rap concert . . . the hand-held element" of the microphone might normalize the image of the performer. Waugh also suggested that perhaps the experience of the operatic voice itself as "super-human" might even further a perception that "opera is this inaccessible art form" to attendees. Although performers are still singing with vibrato and a full open tone, amplification helps to counter this perceived "barrier" between audience member and performer (Waugh, interview).

poorly with their friends."[58] These actions humanize not only the performers but also counter perceptions of the genre as stuffy and inaccessible.

Another branch of outreach events that Adler fellows seemed to understand as an extension of the pop-ups were the SFO's "Bravo! Club: Meet the Adlers" events. While not officially under the umbrella of the lab programming, these events were described in interviews with Adler fellows when I asked about the pop-ups. The Bravo! Club is a young professionals group founded by the SFO in 1991 that "aims to bring together a dedicated and dynamic group of young adults throughout the Bay Area with a love of opera and a burgeoning interest in arts and culture, while helping to build the future audience for San Francisco Opera [*sic*]."[59] "Meet the Adlers: Unmasked Edition" was a Bravo! Club event held on November 1, 2018 that, according to Adler pianist and coach César Cañón, was more about the audience socializing with the Adler fellows than operatic performance.[60] During the event, attendees got to know the Adler fellows through a Q&A based on information that had been gleaned from social media about each artist. Cañón and his fellow collaborative pianist, John Elam, were then featured in a two-part "IPA Faceoff." Cañón described the event:

> The IPA faceoff [used] the International Phonetic Alphabet, in which I read IPA and we had to guess which aria it was. . . . And then John had to [translate] German IPA from a German fragment. The second faceoff was another IPA faceoff in which we had to chug an IPA in front of the audience, and who ever chugged it first was the winner.[61]

This activity both reveals "insider" information about the career of a professional singer or coach and plays on the humorous implications of the abbreviation IPA. The International Phonetic Alphabet, a system of phonetic representation established in 1886 by the International Phonetic Association, is often used to communicate phonetic pronunciation in an array of languages. Singers at all levels use IPA to phonetically represent the entirety of a role in an unfamiliar language or as shorthand for challenging moments of pronunciation (for example, an [e], as in the German "der" for example, versus an [ɛ] as in the German "Herz"). The second faceoff Cañón describes plays on the other meaning of IPA—an India Pale Ale.[62]

The pop-ups, "Meet the Adlers," and Wilsey Center programming alike seem to be working from a position of minimizing the discomfort of operatic performance, albeit in different directions and with different effects. The Wilsey Center programming suggested experimentalism through an intimate performance space with the goal of envisioning new forms of operatic performance. The pop-ups and Bravo! club event softened the stereotypes of opera while reinforcing the dominance of

---

[58] Umezawa, phone interview with author, February 26, 2019.

[59] Bravo! Club! Events, Facebook, November 1, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/pg/SFOperaBravo/about/?ref=page_internal.

[60] Both Bravo! Club events were part of the SFO+ Initiative, a "design-thinking sprint . . . focused on increasing the profile of the Adlers." Umezawa, email message to author, April 10, 2019.

[61] Cañón, interview.

[62] Another of the night's activities involved blindfolding Adler countertenor Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen and requiring him to identify which Adler fellow was singing in falsetto. As listed in Figure 2, a prototype event for the November "Meet the Adler's" event was held in February 2018 and run by Cañón and Umezawa. Umezawa, email message to author, April 10, 2019.

traditional repertoire. As Waugh described, "What we're performing really at all of these pop-ups is pretty much the greatest hits of opera, you know? You're hearing all of the music that you've probably heard in a commercial, or you've heard in a movie . . . and that music is the music that you'll hear on the mainstage."[63] The pop-ups rebrand canonic operas as hip and accessible through humor, pastiche, and dynamic forms of spectatorship, while the lab space sells experimental works in a traditional but intimate set up.

The Mainstage and Populist Appeal

Waugh and Pulitzer initially expected that the pop-ups would appeal to the same consumer base as that of the Wilsey Center. A follow-up conversation regarding the SF Opera Lab in 2018 with Waugh, however, revealed a different result. Waugh described how, contrary to the SFO's expectations, the pop-ups had led to a modest increase in *mainstage* attendance rather than boosting that of the Wilsey Center. According to Waugh, the Wilsey Center programming had been regarded as "more intellectual" and "esoteric" in comparison to the "populous" programming on the mainstage of the opera house. Put another way, the pop-up events marketed a specific definition of opera which unintentionally corresponded to the mainstage, not the offerings of the Wilsey Center.[64] Although the pop-ups were conceived of as feeder events into the Wilsey component of the SF Opera Lab, new audience members tended to choose to attend canonic works on the mainstage rather than venture into the experimental programming in the alterative space. Waugh attributed this consumer path partially to repertoire:

> We especially saw this [pattern of pop-up to mainstage] last summer when we produced very popular titles in the summer season. We produced *Don Giovanni, La bohème,* and *Rigoletto.* These three titles, they're considered "A" level operas, and they are more accessible and familiar. And we saw a pretty significant number of former pop-up attendees, who have never engaged with the opera before, make a purchase to attend one of those operas. The number was around ten to fifteen percent. But that's a pretty significant number of people making that jump without [the SFO] really targeting them, and without that ever being the design of what we were trying to do with the pop-ups.[65]

Rather than communicating experimental or alternative notions of the genre, the pop-ups seem to balance both "barely opera" and "opera" to attract new audience members to the mainstage to the detriment of performances that do not fit into this standardized category.[66]

In our 2016 interview, both Pulitzer and Waugh acknowledged the problems in using experimental operas for the sole purpose of drawing patrons into the mainstage space. However, in the conversation, they also seemed unable to move away

---

[63] Waugh, interview.
[64] Waugh, interview.
[65] Waugh, interview.
[66] In our 2018 conversation, Waugh emphasized the prototype nature of the "Barely Opera" event title, pointing out that although "Barely Opera" "was the name we ended up landing on, what we discovered soon thereafter is that it seemed apologetic. We realized that we shouldn't be *ashamed* of calling it opera" (Waugh, interview).

from this traditional model of investing in future subscribers—that is, the same model of the white, wealthy, and over-the-age-of-fifty subscriber who currently supports the house. Pulitzer explained that the SF Opera Lab was interested in:

> the patron journey of the young user who is unencumbered, there are no kids, there's no huge mortgage . . . they have a disposable income and time to leverage to be able to go to stuff—that's the sort of people we're trying to reach now, but most studies show that those people drop out—they go heavy on career and family . . . and then they come back in their forties and fifties. The long play is to build opera patrons and advocates for the future.[67]

The SF Opera Lab seems to be focused on audiences who, in twenty years, will resemble the audiences of the present in terms of race, class, and age. Simultaneously, experimental opera techniques such as intimacy, participatory spectatorship, and changing venues are used to draw in spectators, while a traditional notion of opera is promoted within an alternative venue.

Many of the comments made by Waugh and Pulitzer about overcoming the perceived barriers of opera attendance also have to do with improving the impressions around the SFO brand. Critics, composers, and opera fans have praised David Gockley for commissioning a number of new operas by US American composers during his ten years as General Manager of the SFO from 2006 to 2016. Gockley's openness towards new works, however, should be interpreted within a broadly populist aesthetic. As Gockley himself admitted in a 2016 press interview: "I've been pilloried [for saying] Modernism has failed the mainstream opera establishment in the U.S.A . . . I think it's too intellectual, it's too unattractive to the ear. So obviously, I've tried to steer the new pieces away from that."[68] Gockley's bias against pieces he considered "modernist" have had long-ranging effects on dialogues about the effectiveness of "experimentalism" at the SFO. Put another way, the SF Opera Lab, inaugurated during Gockley's tenure, had more to do with rebranding opera as a genre than rebranding opera at the SFO specifically.

While neither Waugh nor Pulitzer commented directly on the perceived conservatism of the SFO, marketing efforts seem to imply that the SFO brand could be perceived as conservative or old-fashioned.[69] By contrast, Waugh described that the hope after leaving a pop-up event was that the consumer would "walk away not necessarily saying, 'Oh I want to see an opera now,' but next time someone says San Francisco Opera to them, they'll say, 'oh yeah, they're cool. I went to this cool event they did once.' So that in the end is going to have a massive pay off when they—they may be looking for a new experience, and they may say, 'well let's give this a chance because I did try this once, and it was really great'."[70] A cynical perspective on this example might be that the SF Opera Lab programming was, in the long run, meant to improve the brand of the San Francisco Opera. The SFO

---

[67] Pulitzer and Waugh, interview.
[68] Cooper, "In San Francisco, Opera Impresario David Gockley Hangs up his Cloak."
[69] For a discussion of the SFO's perceived conservatism, see David Levin, "Opera out of performance: Verdi's *Macbeth* at the San Francisco Opera," in "Performance Studies and Opera," special issue, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 16, no. 3 (2004), 265–66.
[70] Waugh, interview.

saw an opportunity to capitalize on what has appeared to be an effective strategy used by other opera companies to draw in new audience members. These efforts *were* partially successful, especially with regards to the pop-ups, which, according to Waugh, brought in groups of attendees in which 75 percent of the median age was under thirty-five and over 56 percent of the attendees were new to the SFO online guest system.[71] By zooming out and examining the labor constraints and the 2019 status of the program, however, it becomes clear that the SF Opera Lab illuminates the difficulties of large opera companies attempting to incorporate experimental models drawn from smaller companies.

"It's a bandwidth issue": The Fate of Small-Scale Opera at the SFO

The SF Opera Lab initiative provides a specific example of the ways in which a tier-one opera house engaged with experimental practices and forms of spectatorship through the formation of a separate line of lab offerings. In a conversation with the author on April 10, 2019, an anonymous Adler fellow suggested that this effort created a "company within a company." While the lab space garnered significant press attention, including a detailed review in the *New York Times*, and press coverage in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, this attention was not without pushback from the traditional sectors of the SFO. Waugh explained that, despite excitement for the Wilsey Center space, this new branch of programming faced ideological challenges from its inception. He explained: "the company is very much rooted in the grand opera model. . . . If you say to the rest of the company, 'we're gonna start producing these small-scale experimental works,' they're gonna say 'hey, that's not what we do'."[72] At the same time, this idea of what was normative for the conservative SFO seemed to conflict with the company's direct competition. Waugh related: "You see the other opera houses, the A-opera houses, like LA, Chicago, Houston, Washington DC, are starting to launch these new kinds of programming initiatives, and that, I think, is really driven by the kind of artist-driven work that's happening outside of the opera houses that is making that huge impact."[73]

Waugh's comments about the SFO's identity as a company also foreground issues of labor and identity that appeared in our discussions as well as in my conversations with other anonymous SFO Adler fellows. As Waugh explained during our 2016 dialogue, the lab space was problematic from a union perspective. The SFO's employees are represented by eight unions, including the American Federation of Musicians, American Guild of Musical Artists, and the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees.[74] The Wilsey space presents a challenge because it does not require the full forces of unionized performers which would be overkill

---

[71] Sean Waugh, "Experimental Programming Initiatives: Reaching Next-Gen Audiences" (presentation, 49th Annual OPERA American Conference, San Francisco, June 14, 2019).

[72] Waugh, interview.

[73] Waugh, interview.

[74] Complete union affiliations include the American Federation of Musicians, Local 6; the American Guild of Musical Artists, Inc.; the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, Local 16; the Theatrical Wardrobe Union, Local 784 I.A.T.S.E.; The Art Directors Guild & Scenic, Title and Graphics Artists, Local 800; United Scenic Artists Local USA – 829, I.A.T.S.E.; and the

for the smaller space. Mainstage performances, for example, require a union min-imum of twelve dressers.[75] While Theatrical Wardrobe Union business agent Bobbi Boe noted that, for those members of Local 784, the Wilsey Center provided more days of work for the local crew, she also acknowledged some of the intricacies of incorporating the Wilsey Center into negotiations. For example, the SFO was unsure the extent to which the Wilsey Center would be used, and the small space meant that the "size and type of production" could, in Boe's words, "be limited."[76] The issue of balancing union requirements and supporting union laborers is chal-lenging with regards to any large opera company's desire to experiment with new forms of production. Experimental opera companies, like those introduced in the beginning of this article, do not have to contend with these types of restraints, and for better or worse they are more financially sustainable with regards to experimentation.

At the same time, maintaining the SF Opera Lab required additional labor on the part of many full-time employees of the SFO. In a conversation with the author on April 10, 2019, an anonymous Adler fellow hinted at the extent to which the lab drew on the efforts of staff members:

> [The SF Opera Lab programming] is a bandwidth issue. When you have a staff that is trying to put on a mainstage season, and then they're side-desking what is essentially an entirely other company, maximizing their efforts becomes an issue. I think the drive was there, I think people in the company thought the work of opera lab was incredibly important, I think they got very excited about it, and I think they also had full-time jobs that they had to do extremely well.

As this individual details, the SF Opera Lab was a difficult branch of programming to maintain because there were not specific staffing resources dedicated exclusively to auxiliary programming. Adler fellows already receiving twelve-month salaries were the primary performers at the pop-ups, but this was additional labor they and others were asked to do. The Adlers I spoke to expressed mixed opinions about this extra work. One stressed the opportunities and exposure provided by the Adler fellow-ship, concluding that "I might have felt exploited if it wasn't the SFO, and I wasn't getting this incredible injection of clout into my career."[77] Similarly, during

---

Box Office and Front of House Employees Union, Local B-18 ("People: Union Representation," San Francisco Opera, https://sfopera.com/about-us/people/union-representation/).

[75] This tension between production forces and small-space needs is an issue common to many larger established houses contemplating small-scale work. See Sam Whiting, "Around SF's Arts Scene, the State of the Unions is Strong," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 5, 2016, https://www.sfchronicle.com/performance/article/Around-SF-s-arts-scene-the-state-of-the-unions-9203030.php; and Jake Rosenfeld, *What Unions No Longer Do* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014) for an overview and analysis on union logistics, protections, and negotiations.

[76] Bobbi Boe, email messages to author, April 24–30, 2019.

[77] This comment from a conversation with the author on April 10, 2019 also exemplifies the classic neoliberal phenomenon of being "paid" in exposure. See Mariana Ritchey, "'Amazing Together': Mason Bates, Classical Music, and Neoliberal Values," *Music and Politics* 9, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 10, http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0011.202; and Yiannis Mylonas, "Amateur Creation and Entrepreneurialism: A Critical Study of Artistic Production in Post-Fordist Structures," *tripleC* 10, no. 1 (2012): 1–11. From another angle, performer rhetoric that recasts exploitation as opportunity can be read as an example of Robin James's critique of neoliberalism through the lens of resilience dis-course. Resilience discourse, James explains, regards risk and even damage as an appropriate sacrifice

a conversation about the preparations required for singers and pianists for the pop-ups, Cañón emphasized the ways in which the pop-up performances tended to use repertoire the singers were already working on or with which they were familiar, for example, Mozart and bel canto standards.[78] By his rationale, the low-key style of the pop-ups were meant to prevent them from being stressful as performances.

It remains to be seen what the long-term implications of the SF Lab Programming will be. As of now, the Wilsey Center programming has been on hiatus since 2017. At the April 5, 2019 SFO Annual Membership Meeting, General Director Matthew Shilvock answered a question about "chamber operas [returning] to the Wilsey Center Atrium" in the negative, explaining that "financial constraints" limited Wilsey Center productions. Shilvock also suggested that West Edge Opera and Opera Parallèle "serve the region's opera ecosystem" with regards to chamber opera.[79] Shilvock's language is striking in this example; "experimental" practices in 2016 seem to have been subsumed by "chamber works" in 2019.

One pop-up, "The Battle of the Divas," occurred in September 2018; since then, however, there have been no events. A perusal of the SFO's finances reveals another troubling fact: the company operated at a deficit of $500,000 in fiscal year 2016, and in fiscal year 2017, that deficit increased to $700,000.[80] The company's decision to decrease the rate of auxiliary programming while putting on the Ring Cycle in the summer of 2018 can be read as an example of this kind of conservative financial programming. Finally, the SFO cut ten staff positions in March 2019.[81] As a program that is now on hiatus (perhaps permanently), the SF Opera Lab represents a temporally constrained effort that diverged from other more traditional streams of still-ongoing auxiliary programming such as educational outreach. The past two years of auxiliary programming, however, reveal an evolving notion of just what constitutes "experimental" opera and audience appeal in the twenty-first century and the consequences of what it might mean to "brand" opera.

Bohème in Bars and as Border Walls: Concluding Thoughts

The story of the SF Opera Lab auxiliary initiative exemplifies tensions between spectatorship practices and content. Conflicts between accessibility and experimentation too are grounded in historical precedent. When describing his inclusive programming initiatives at the HGO in a 1984 interview, Gockley stated: "We have people coming through the turnstiles at *three times* the rate of the grand opera series. All

---

for later gains. In this example, precarious labor practices are recast as opportunities for resilience—in this case, exposure—and thus perpetuate systems of oppression. See James, *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015).

[78] Cañón, interview.

[79] Janos Gereben, "San Francisco Opera Ponders the Future," *San Francisco Classical Voice,* April 5, 2019, https://www.sfcv.org/music-news/san-francisco-opera-ponders-the-future.

[80] Janos Gereben, "San Francisco Opera Ponders the Future."

[81] Cuts included Director of Communications and Public Affairs Jon Finck and Director of Development Andrew Morgan, neither of whom will be replaced. Janobos Gereben, "Changes and Cutbacks at S. F. Opera Eliminate Some Top Positions," *San Francisco Classical Voice,* March 7, 2019, https://www.sfcv.org/music-news/changes-and-cutbacks-at-sf-opera-eliminate-some-top-positions. See also *Opera America*, People: Transitions, Spring 2019.

sorts of people—corporate executives, voters, politicians . . . if some crusty old man attends a Lena Horne show, in a front box, and has a great time, that's our way to get his contribution. If I take him to *Wozzeck* I'll never see him again."[82] Gockley's 1984 language is strikingly similar to Waugh's 2018 analysis of the draw of the mainstage versus the Wilsey Center space: "You just want to have a feel-good night, you know? You're going to choose *La bohème* over going to *La voix humaine*, right?"[83] The SFO mistranslated the success of small-scale experimental efforts such as those put on by The Industry and Beth Morrison Projects. While these companies perform new music, they are also alluring because of the way they market new forms of spectatorship. In the case of *La voix humaine* (and *Wozzeck*), the SFO conflated twentieth-century modernism with twenty-first century experimentation. Inherent in both Gockley's and Waugh's quotes is the belief that certain kinds of repertoire will draw in audiences and, by contrast, certain kinds of repertoire will not.

Gockley, Waugh, and, in turn, the SFO are also making a broad statement about just what constitutes "populist" operatic repertoire. In contrast to the pop-ups, the Wilsey Center inadvertently served as a foil to the populist programming of the mainstage rather than serving as an experimental venue. I find Waugh's statement that the canonic repertoire in particular exemplified "populous programming" to be telling. It seems to me that despite the company's best efforts, the SFO sold canonic operatic repertoire historically understood as elitist as populist repertoire and experimental material meant to welcome in the "opera curious" as elitist and stereotypical. The company's greatest success was not in rebranding the SFO but in rebranding the canon. The pop-ups worked to break down the "perceptual barriers" of the operatic genre and those surrounding the performers, but they also re-inscribed notions of the canon and traditional figurations—or hierarchies—of the opera house.[84] In so doing, the SFO managed to support the needs of traditional opera attendees who still constitute the majority of ticketholders and donors while drawing in new audiences. Practically speaking, "rebranding" the canon was also a good business choice given the financial precarity at the SFO beginning as early as 1996. As David Levin notes, from 2003 to 2006, then–General Director Pamela Rosenberg made the financial choice to cut down the annual number of productions and "in lieu of launching new productions . . . [sought] to restage earlier ones."[85]

---

[82] Quoted in Metcalf, "Institutions and Patrons in American Opera: The Reception of Philip Glass, 1976–1992," 209.

[83] Waugh, interview.

[84] In writing about a cancelled production of *Macbeth* in 2003 (under SFO General Director Pamela Rosenberg), Levin approaches the conflict between experimentation and audience expectation from a different angle. "The battle in San Francisco—which is neither new to opera nor specific to San Francisco—pits one conception of opera against another: in this case, an artistic leadership committed to a conception of opera as a forum for artistic experimentation versus those (in the community, in the press) committed to opera as a forum for more or less conventionalized diversion." Levin, "Opera out of performance," 266. This example paints a very different picture of how experimentation was conceived under Rosenberg's tenure as compared to Gockley's, an observation that makes sense given the financial crisis at the SFO that Rosenberg inherited and of which Gockley would have been aware.

[85] Levin, "Opera out of performance," 265.

Twenty years later, rebranding the canon seems to have shifted from solid financial move to company ideology.

The SFO's experiment with operatic populism, and more broadly, the status of traditional and experimental opera today, reveals faults in US culture over the status of historically defined "high" culture—who can make it, and how, drink in hand, we can consume it. Populism, political scholar Margaret Canovan writes, is "an appeal to the people against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society," such as "individualism, internationalism, multiculturalism, permissiveness, and belief in progress."[86] Populism is pernicious in that it promises to upend established power structures while eliminating the ideological pathways by which these structures can be improved. Marketing the canon within the institutional space of the opera house as "for the people" makes invisible other processes of violence and erasure such as xenophobia, misogyny, and white nationalism, while it also minimizes the complexity of individual canonic works. While forms of experimentation-in-performance could serve as one of the means by which these hegemonic values are challenged, they are instead considered overly intellectual and thus problematic.[87]

Populism is not the property of the political right or left. Rather, it performs a kind of theoretical opposition to institutionalized norms. While experimentalist movements can also be (broadly) characterized in this way, twentieth and twenty-first century Latin American and US history suggests they are more often affiliated with an opposition to traditional institutions and/or the political left. In fact, as Susan Thomas and others suggest, notions of aesthetic experimentalism in a Pan-American context have historically included forms of leftist political commitment or action.[88] It is this system of commitment that I find essential to understanding the implications of the SFO's actions towards experimentation and populism on a global level. Argentine composer Graciela Paraskevaídis's comments to Herrera regarding avant-garde aesthetics are illuminating in this regard. Paraskevaídis says: "Truthful are works that break codes, that establish a fringe

---

[86] Margaret Canovan, "Trust the People!: Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (1999): 3–4.

[87] While suggesting experimentation as a broad counter to dominant hegemonic practices, I am also aware of recent scholarship that has located "experimentalism" as problematically constructed both within the "space of whiteness" and specifically within a US musical tradition. Forms of experimentation meant to counter these practices must take these histories into consideration. See, for example, George Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), and Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L. Madrid, "The Practices of Experimentalism in Latin@ and Latin American Music: An Introduction," in *Experimentalisms in Practice: Music Perspectives from Latin America*, ed. Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L. Madrid (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 6–7.

[88] See Susan Thomas, "Experimental Alternatives: Institutionalism, Avant-Gardism, and Popular Music at the Margins of the Cuban Revolution," in *Experimentalisms in Practice: Music Perspectives from Latin America*, ed. Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L. Madrid (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 21–48; and Andrew Raffo Dewar, "Performance, Resistance, and the Sounding of Public Space: Movimento Música Más in Buenos Aires, 1969–1973," in *Experimentalisms in Practice: Music Perspectives from Latin America*, ed. Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L. Madrid (New York: Oxford University Pres, 2018), 279–304.

situation . . . that are taking risks."[89] Political populists often (whether inadvertently or deliberately) bolster the status-quo while branding their actions as revolutionary. Their rhetoric or policies might appear to break with tradition while in fact inscribing certain norms more deeply. In turn, the canon-as-populous repertoire seems to have limited potential to "break codes" and "take risks." Likewise, while experimentalism might "take risks," it is also not free from the influences of capital or politics. Some of the experimental practices used in the Wilsey space and in forms of auxiliary programming across the country might be understood as a form of commodified experimentation without actually breaking from convention.

Populism is not a new character on the stage of political or operatic theaters. Historian Joan Rubin frames the tension between elitism and populism with regards to access to art as being part of a "paradoxical" process of sacralization and de-sacralization that has long been a part of cultural history. While twentieth-century US cultural institutions attempted to broaden access to high art, Rubin explains, they also sacralized certain products of Western art music and deepened the cultural hierarchy between non-experts and experts.[90] As Metcalf notes, an emphasis on populist musical idioms motivated impresarios such as Gockley to commission works that might appeal to a broad US public.[91] According to Gockley "composers who were thought of being too 'popular' or pandering . . . were slammed" in the 1970s. In 2016, new compositions written to appeal to a US public are instead marked as too political or elitist.[92] By contrast, the warhorses of the canon are more desirable and appealing to new audiences than might first be expected. For example, a market research study put out by Opera Theatre of St. Louis (OTSL) in 2018 concluded that in 2016, 2017, and 2018 "warhorse operas were more popular with younger audiences than contemporary, socially relevant works."[93] As Nicole Freber, OTSL director of development, concluded in the report, "we thought that new work was the most appealing thing to younger audiences and more diverse audiences . . . and we're seeing some of that, but we're also seeing the very traditional rep is appealing to those groups as well."[94] The OTSL study confirms that, for some new operagoers, repertoire is a complicated signifier. Perhaps even in 2019, *Le Nozze di Figaro*—canonic opera, "genius" composer—

---

[89] Quoted in Herrera, "'That's Not Something to Show in a Concert,'" 45.

[90] Joan Shelley Rubin, "Reading and Classical Music in Mid-Twentieth-Century America," in *Edinburgh History of Reading: Modern Readers*, ed. Mary Hammond (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 209.

[91] These works included those by "contemporary composers with an accessible voice . . . or revivals, all of which featured consonant, often folk-inspired music and American-derived plots." Gockley went on to champion the works of those composers with "crossover appeal" and/or those who had garnered significant audience attention in other places, such as Europe. Philip Glass, as Metcalf writes, fit the bill on both counts. Metcalf, "Funding 'Opera for the 80s and Beyond," 19.

[92] Quoted in Metcalf, "Institutions and Patrons in American Opera: The Reception of Philip Glass, 1976–1992," 212.

[93] Judith H. Dobrzynski, "Think Opera's Not for You?: Opera Theatre of St. Louis Says Think Again," *The Wallace Foundation Knowledge Center,* November 29 2019, https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/think-opera-is-not-for-you-opera-theatre-of-saint-louis-says-think-again.aspx.

[94] Dobrynski, "Think Opera's Not for You?" 8.

has more reliable cultural cache or familiarity than a new and/or "experimental" work.[95]

Another historical marker of the populist aesthetic has emerged in twenty-first century auxiliary programming: drinking. The session, "Building Opera Audiences: Updates and Inspirations" held on Friday, May 20 at the 2016 Opera America Conference in Montreal, promised to impart strategies for increased audience engagement based on information from the "past four funding cycles."[96] An anonymous opera industry executive had a cynical take on the session. They explained that, from their perspective, the main strategy promoted during this session was what they disparagingly referred to as the "*Bohème* in a Bar Model." As they commented to the author on August 25, 2016, "It was as though the only way companies were going to attract new audiences was to serve booze and pair to an opera . . . and it was like, this is how you engage an audience, you move it to a casual environment, you do the same piece, and you're immediately going to have new audiences." Despite this individual's skepticism, this model *has* had a small amount of success within many companies, including the SFO.[97] At the same time, their observation is acute: booze is often used by companies especially in auxiliary programming as shorthand for accessibility and experimentalism, not to mention everyman allure.

Waugh's description of a pop-up seems to invoke a similar theme of alcohol and accessibility, but also something unexpected: a rejection of experimentalism along with the embrace of popular drinking culture.

> When you go to a pop-up . . . it's the same stuff that you would hear at the War Memorial Opera House, just in an informal setting. And with microphones, and with the singer not in a costume, and with a beer in hand, and so when you make that jump from [the pop-ups] to the mainstage, it's actually an easier jump than making a jump from a pop-up to yes, a smaller theater, a more intimate space, [the Wilsey Center] but with a program that you've never heard of, a composer you've never heard of, a theme that seems a little intellectual, very deep.[98]

This quote is suggestive on several levels. The singer "with beer in hand," in Waugh's anecdote, and pianists chugging IPAs from the Bravo! performance are equated not just with accessibility but also with a strand of anti-intellectualism. Intellectuals are the new elite, the SFO's Opera Lab programming seems to suggest, and canonic opera—populous programming—is the new antidote to this needless experimentalism.

---

[95] As the classical music PR consultant suggested, the preferences of the OTSL new audiences might also indicate broader opinions over the function of opera as a form of entertainment akin to other light, heavily-marketed forms of musical theater, television, or cinema versus a complex aesthetic experience of any of these forms. In an email message to the author sent on May 28, 2019, they wrote, "if [audiences] can't understand the words without subtitles and have to read, it can be challenging for newcomers to also comprehend complex music/story/sets. We must ask: 'What is our threshold for sensory overload for the purposes of enjoyment?'."

[96] OPERA America, *Annual Conference Program* (Montréal, 2016), 33.

[97] For example, the inaugural performance of Toronto-based Against the Grain Theatre was, in fact, a 2011 production of *Bohème in a Bar*, which was reprised in 2016 in eight sold-out performances.

[98] Waugh, interview.

Using alcohol to connote accessibility is a common theme in experimental and auxiliary programming alike. Drinking a beer with a potential US presidential candidate serves as short-hand for accessibility, likability, and lack of pretension.[99] Drinking a beer with an opera singer serves the same purpose. Just as this voting "suggestion" may mislead the US electorate into choosing candidates for a perceived likability (to say nothing of the implications of gender, race, and sexual orientation connoted by popular US beer-drinking culture), the beer-drinking opera singers singing the *Lucia di Lammermoor* act 2 sextet sell a popular but opaque and incomplete history of twenty-first century US operatic production. In the history of the United States, the canonic sextet, for example, takes on additional meanings of racial violence and class conflict.[100] Marketing it as populous entertainment—and nothing else—feeds into the strands of populism as rejection of, in Canovan's words, "individualism, internationalism, multiculturalism, and permissiveness."[101] US opera history is rife with examples of racial and class exclusion onstage and within the opera house. Promoting a vision of the canon, however, that ignores operatic works and performance histories that *do* engage with inclusive values and reparative practices does a disservice to the ways the genre can be performed today.[102]

While *Le bohème* is not a border wall, it is clear that marketing initiatives such as the SF Opera Lab re-inscribe operatic hierarchies by initiating a new set of elites into canonic tradition while furthering stereotypes of experimentation as needless and overly intellectual. The audience members the SFO was attempting to invite into the house through auxiliary programming initiatives could be understood to be a newly-moneyed elite being taught the historical value of opera as signifier of status. Auxiliary forms of programming meant to normalize operatic culture and make it more accessible are not a bad thing—and neither is the performance of canonic opera. Moreover, those individuals marketing, promoting, performing, and attending opera are acting within a complex network of monetary, cultural, and personal factors. Those of us in and outside of the opera house, however, should ask why attempts at the popularization of operatic culture in the United States—a

---

[99] See, for instance, Scott Horsley, "Obama Polishes his 'Regular Guy' Image with Beer," *All Things Considered* NPR, September 15, 2012, audio, 4:08, https://www.npr.org/2012/09/15/161200943/obama-polishes-his-regular-guy-image-with-beer.

[100] As Hamberlin details, the Lucia sextet, like many popular adaptations of opera arias and ensembles, ended up working as a "free-floating signifier" of the genre. Irving Berlin's "Opera Burlesque," whose narrative depicts the experiences of an African American opera lover, draws on tropes of minstrelsy to contrast the protagonist's level of education with the high-class art form in which he is desirous of taking part (Hamberlin, *Tin-Pan Opera,* 217). See also Buckley's "To the Opera House" for information on class inequalities in mid-nineteenth century New York City and the Astor Place Riot. Brian Carl Clancy uses architectural history to understand the role of the opera house as a symbol of class conflict in the historical United States (Clancy, "An Architectural History of Grand Opera Houses: Constructing Cultural Identity in Urban America from 1850 to the Great Depression" [PhD diss., New York University, 2005]).

[101] Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," 4.

[102] See André, *Black Opera.* Other recent notable productions include the Teatro Nacional Sucre's 2018 production of *Die Zauberflöte* entitled *La Flauta Mágica de los Andes*, which was given in Spanish and Kichwa and incorporated Andean mythology. See Charles Shafaieh, "Cross-Cultural Hybrids," *Opera America* (Spring 2019): 6–7; and "La Flauta Mágica de Los Andes," Fundación Teatro Nacional Sucre, https://www.teatrosucre.com/evento/la-flauta-mágica-de-los-andes.

historically class- and racially stratified art form in this country—are being translated to populism at the expense of experimentation. More broadly, we should consider the extent to which our political and aesthetic affiliations—left, right, traditional, experimental, or somewhere in between—affect the ways we produce, circulate, and consume art on a global scale.

References

Periodicals

National Public Radio
New York Times
Opera America
OPERA America Studies and Reports
San Francisco Chronicle
San Francisco Classical Voice
San Francisco Gate
Wallace Foundation Studies and Reports (Wallace Foundation Knowledge Center)

Books and Articles

Abbate, Carolyn, and Roger Parker. *A History of Opera*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2015.

André, Naomi. *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018.

Alonso-Minutti, Ana R., Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L. Madrid, eds. *Experimentalisms in Practice: Music Perspectives from Latin America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Alonso-Minutti, Ana R., Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L. Madrid. "The Practices of Experimentalism in Latin@ and Latin American Music: An Introduction." In *Experimentalisms in Practice: Music Perspectives from Latin America*, edited by Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L. Madrid, 1–17. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Buckley, Peter Geo. "To the Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820–1860." PhD diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1984.

Canovan, Margaret. "Trust the People!: Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy." *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (1999): 2–16.

Caplan, Lucy. "High Culture on the Lower Frequencies: African Americans and Opera, 1900–1933." PhD diss., Yale University, 2019.

Clancy, Brian Carl. "*An Architectural History of Grand Opera Houses: Constructing Cultural Identity in Urban America from 1850 to the Great Depression*." PhD diss., New York University, 2005.

Dewar, Andrew Raffo. "Performance, Resistance, and the Sounding of Public Space: Movimento Música Más in Buenos Aires, 1969–1973." In *Experimentalisms in Practice: Music Perspectives from Latin America*, edited by Ana

R. Alonso-Minutti, Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L. Madrid, 279–304. New York: Oxford University Pres, 2018.

Dinerstein, Joel. *The Origins of Cool in Postwar America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Dobrzynski, Judith H. "Think Opera's Not for You?: Opera Theatre of St. Louis Says Think Again." The Wallace Foundation Knowledge Center, November 29 2019. https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/think-opera-is-not-for-you-opera-theatre-of-saint-louis-says-think-again.aspx.

Drott, Eric. "The End(s) of Genre." *Journal of Music Theory* 57, no. 1 (April 2013): 1–45.

Eidsheim, Nina. *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015.

Fleeger, Jennifer. *Sounding American: Hollywood, Opera, and Jazz*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Gereben, Janobos. "Changes and Cutbacks at S. F. Opera Eliminate Some Top Positions." *San Francisco Classical Voice*, March 7, 2019. https://www.sfcv.org/music-news/changes-and-cutbacks-at-sf-opera-eliminate-some-top-positions.

Gereben, Janos. "San Francisco Opera Ponders the Future." *San Francisco Classical Voice*, April 5, 2019. https://www.sfcv.org/music-news/san-francisco-opera-ponders-the-future.

Goldmark, Daniel. *Tunes for 'Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Hall, Stuart. "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice* 20, no. 1 (Spring Summer 1993): 104–14.

Hamberlin, Larry. *Tin-Pan Opera: Operatic Novelty Songs in the Ragtime Era*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Harvie, Jen. *Fair Play: Art, Performance, and Neoliberalism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Herrera, Eduardo. "'That's Not Something to Show in a Concert': Experimentation and Legitimacy at the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales." In *Experimentalisms in Practice: Music Perspectives from Latin America*, edited by Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L. Madrid, 19–48. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Hoyt, David, and Robert L. Sutton. "What Design Thinking is Doing for the San Francisco Opera." *Harvard Business Review*, June 3, 2016. https://hbr.org/2016/06/what-design-thinking-is-doing-for-the-san-francisco-opera.

James, Robin. *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism*. Winchester: Zero Books, 2015.

Johnson-Rutherford, Tim. *Music after the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture since 1989*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017.

Latham, Clara. "How Many Voices Can She Have?: Destabilizing Desire and Identification in *American Lulu*." *Opera Quarterly* 33, nos. 3–4 (Summer–Autumn 2017): 303–18.

Levin, David. "Opera Out of Performance: Verdi's Macbeth at San Francisco Opera." In "Performance Studies and Opera." Special issue. *Cambridge Opera Journal* 16, no. 3 (November 2004): 249–67.

Levine, Lawrence. *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Lewis, George. *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Locke, Ralph P. "Music Lovers, Patrons, and the 'Sacralization' of Culture in America." *19th Century Music* 17, no, 2 (Autumn 1993): 149–73.

McConachie, Bruce A. "New York Operagoing, 1825–50: Creating an Elite Social Ritual." *American Music* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 181–92.

Metcalf, Sasha. "Funding 'Opera for the 80s and Beyond': The Role of Impresarios in Creating a New American Repertoire." *American Music* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 7–28.

Metcalf, Sasha. "Institutions and Patrons in American Opera: The Reception of Philip Glass, 1976–1992." PhD diss., University of California at Santa Barbara, 2015.

Monson, Ingrid. "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 396–422.

Moore, Andrea. "Neoliberalism and the Musical Entrepreneur." *Journal of the Society for American Music* 10, no. 1 (2016): 33–53.

Mylonas, Yiannis, "Amateur Creation and Entrepreneurialism: A Critical Study of Artistic Production in Post-Fordist Structures." *tripleC* 10, no. 1 (2012): 1–11.

Piekut, Benjamin. *Experimentalism Otherwise*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

Preston, Katherine. *Opera for the People: English-Language Opera and Women Managers in Late 19th-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Preston, Katherine. *Opera on the Road: Traveling Opera Troupes in the United States, 1825–1860*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993.

Preston, Katherine. "Between the Cracks: The Performance of English-Language Opera in Late Nineteenth-Century America." In "Nineteenth-Century Special Issue," ed. Katherine Preston and David Nicholls. *American Music* 21, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 349–74.

OPERA America. *Opera America Annual Field Report 2017*. New York: OPERA America, 2018. https://operaamerica.org/files/oadocs/financials/FY16_AFR.pdf.

Ritchey, Marianna. *Composing Capital: Classical Music in the Neoliberal Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019.

Ritchey, Marianna. "'Amazing Together': Mason Bates, Classical Music, and Neoliberal Values." *Music and Politics* 9, no. 2 (Summer 2017). http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0011.202.

Robin, Will. "Balance Problems: Neoliberalism and New Music in the American University and Ensemble." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 71, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 749–93.

Robin, Will. "The Rise and Fall of 'Indie Classical': Tracing a Controversial Term in Twenty First Century New Music." *Journal of the Society for American Music* 12, no. 1 (2018): 55–88.

Rosenfeld, Jake. *What Unions No Longer Do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Rubin, Joan Shelley. *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992.

Rubin, Joan Shelley. "Reading and Classical Music in Mid-Twentieth-Century America." In *Edinburgh History of Reading: Modern Readers*, edited by Mary Hammond, 206–25. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020.

Rutherford-Johnson, Tim. *Music After the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture since 1989*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017.

Shafaieh, Charles. "Cross-Cultural Hybrids." *Opera America* (Spring 2019): 6–7.

Sim, Yi Hong. "Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and the Avant-Garde: The Significance of New Music Practice in a Revised Temporality of Class-Based Resistance." Paper presented at the 2nd Biennial Conference on Musicology and the Present, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Bezanson Auditorium, September 17–18, 2016.

Steichen, James. "HD Opera: A Love/Hate Story." *Opera Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (Autumn 2011): 443–59.

Steichen, James. "The Metropolitan Opera Goes Public: Peter Gelb and The Institutional Dramaturgy of *The Met: Live in HD*," *Music and the Moving Image* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 24–30.

Steigerwald Ille, Megan. "Bringing Down the House: Situating and Mediating Opera in the Twenty-First Century." PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2018.

Taylor, Timothy. *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Thomas, Susan. "Experimental Alternatives: Institutionalism, Avant-Gardism, and Popular Music at the Margins of the Cuban Revolution." In *Experimentalisms in Practice: Music Perspectives from Latin America*, edited by Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L. Madrid, 49–66. New York: Oxford University Pres, 2018.

Whiting, Sam. "Around SF's Arts Scene, the State of the Unions is Strong." *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 5, 2016. https://www.sfchronicle.com/performance/article/Around-SF-s-arts-scene-the-state-of-the-unions-9203030.php.

Wiebe, Heather. "A Note from the Guest Editor." *Opera Quarterly* 25, nos. 1–2 (Winter–Spring 2009): 3–5.

Žižek, Slavoj, and Mladen Dolar, *Opera's Second Death*. London: Routledge, 2002.