

MEDIA REVIEWS

Met Opera on Demand <https://www.metopera.org/season/on-demand/>

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When the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic shut down industries across the United States in March 2020, the effects were particularly acute among performing arts organizations. The Metropolitan Opera (the Met), for instance, canceled the final fifty-eight performances of its season, furloughed its musicians indefinitely without pay, and by one estimate lost \$150 million in earned revenues while the theater stood dark.¹ Perhaps the only bright spot for the company was its online streaming service, Met Opera on Demand (MOD). In the first five weeks of the shutdown, paid subscriptions to the service doubled to 30,000, as opera aficionados sought virtually what they could no longer experience in person.²

This remarkable shift in operatic consumption is understandable. MOD offers a simple, intuitive interface, accessible via Internet browsers as well as apps on Apple, Android, Roku, and other common devices. Most importantly, it boasts an unparalleled catalog comprising historic and recent radio broadcasts as well as standard- (SD) and high-definition (HD) video recordings. The audio-only broadcasts number more than 500, with the earliest recordings—such as Rosa Ponselle’s star turn as Violetta in *La Traviata*—stretching back to 1935. The SD videos include more than eighty telecasts broadcast live on television from 1977 to 2003, and the HD recordings draw on the Met’s archive of “Live in HD” theater simulcasts, whose launch in 2006 coincided with the first iteration of the Met’s streaming opera service. Since then, the catalog has grown substantially, from 104 videos and 262 audio recordings in 2012 (when the current iteration of MOD launched) to more than 750 offerings today.³

Both the MOD catalog and its digital presentation reflect the Met’s traditional approach to programming, with its emphasis on star power and warhorses. Just ten operas—standards such as *Carmen*, *Tosca*, and *La Bohème*, which have more than a dozen recordings each—account for around twenty percent of the catalog, which contains 155 different operas. The search function allows users to sort the catalog by composer, opera title, or artist. This latter category, however, consists only of singers and conductors, omitting the directors, designers, and other artists vital to operatic production. This limitation, perhaps a concession to the audio-only majority of the catalog, is sure to frustrate users interested in opera’s visual elements. Even so, the MOD catalog offers extensive breadth, including recordings of infrequently programmed operas such as Fromental Halévy’s *La Juive*, Riccardo Zandonai’s *Francesca da Rimini*, and Arnold Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron*. Season galas, recitals by star singers like Luciano Pavarotti and Lise Davidsen, audio playlists of various Met performers (including “African American Artists at the Met, 1955–1985”), and the occasional documentary supplement the collection. Finally, the catalog usefully includes recordings of nearly two dozen post-1945 operas, ranging from the rarely heard—Martin David Levy’s *Mourning Becomes Electra* and Samuel Barber’s *Anthony and Cleopatra* are two such operas—to newly minted classics, including John Adams’s *Nixon in China*, Tan Dun’s *The First Emperor*, and

¹Julia Jacobs, “The Met Opera’s Musicians, Unpaid Since April, Are Struggling,” *New York Times*, March 17, 2021; Julia Jacobs, “The Met Opera Races to Reopen After Months of Pandemic Silence,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2021.

²Joshua Barone, “How the Met Opera Is Throwing a Gala Concert with Smartphones,” *New York Times*, April 24, 2020.

³Anastasia Tsioulcas, “The Metropolitan Opera Anytime—And Anywhere—You Want It,” *NPR, Deceptive Cadence*, March 15, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2012/03/15/148666124/the-metropolitan-opera-anytime-and-anywhere-you-want-it> (accessed November 28, 2021); see also Kathleen DeLaurenti, “Met Opera On Demand: Student Access (review),” *Notes: Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association* 70, no. 4 (2014): 727–29.

Kaija Saariaho's *L'Amour de loin* (from 2016; the first opera by a female composer staged by the company since 1903). The Met would do well to add its production of Terence Blanchard's *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* from 2021 and Anthony Davis's *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* (slated for 2023) to its offerings, which at present do not include any operas by Black composers.

One recent addition to the catalog is Philip Glass's 1983 opera, *Akhmaten*. This recording of a November 2019 Live in HD performance serves as a useful example of the Met's general aesthetic as well as how its operas are presented via the streaming service. The production, designed by director Phelim McDermott (who staged the breathtaking Met-English National Opera production of Glass's *Satyagraha* in 2008), leans into the spectacle and ritual of the art form. During the opera's grandiose choruses, a troupe of jugglers constructs visual patterns in the air that complement Glass's richly orchestrated arpeggiations. Elsewhere, more intimate numbers, such as the iconoclastic pharaoh's "Hymn to the Sun" and his love duet with Nefertiti, unfold hypnotically in conjunction with an austere but striking *mise en scène*. Put simply, the production is splendid. Conductor Karen Kamensek's sense of pacing is superb, and countertenor Anthony Roth Constanzo (*Akhmaten*), mezzo-soprano J'Nai Bridges (*Nefertiti*), and bass-baritone Zachary James (*Amenhotep I*, whose extensive spoken lines serve a key narrative function) all deliver compelling vocal performances.

Experienced via MOD, *Akhmaten* includes the pre-opera and intermission commentaries that typify the Live in HD simulcasts; these add a documentary component to the operatic experience that James Steichen aptly describes as the Met's "institutional dramaturgy."⁴ In this performance, mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato hosts these segments. In the MOD interface, these "Backstage at the Met" interviews with singers and members of the creative team, which take place at intermissions during simulcasts, occupy the bottom of a track list that allows users to jump to specific musical numbers within the opera. Although *Akhmaten* does not include subtitles for the ancient Egyptian, Akkadian, and Hebrew portions of the libretto (an aesthetic decision intended to create hermeneutic space between music and text), the spoken vernacular portions (English in this production) allow for German, Spanish, French, Russian, and Swedish subtitles. The interface also includes a brief paragraph about the production's significance, a link to a synopsis, and a short list of the lead roles and their performers.

For scholars and students of opera, MOD is an impressive resource—to a degree. Despite its near ubiquity among higher education libraries, MOD inexplicably lacks materials that would easily enhance its educational and research value. Digital copies of program booklets, for instance—many available elsewhere on the Met's website—are one obvious example. Scholarly commentary or essays about problematic productions are another. A content advisory beneath the main search function warns users that some performances include "offensive racial and cultural depictions and stereotypes," such as "blackface, brownface, and yellowface makeup," as well as "racist cultural depictions within the texts of the operas themselves."⁵ Although this advisory also notes that the Met is "committed to addressing these vital issues in our programming, whether archival or in the future," this commitment is nowhere else evident in MOD. In older productions such as a 1979 *Otello* (with Plácido Domingo singing in blackface) and even recent productions such as a 2018 *Aida* (with a noticeably "bronzed" Anna Netrebko), there is no specific acknowledgment or critique of these practices. The content advisory, then, comes across as perfunctory. If the Met is serious about undertaking the necessary work of dismantling white supremacy in opera, it would do well to give further thought—and action—to making its commitment more evident and effective on its streaming opera service.

Ryan Ebright is a musicologist at Bowling Green State University whose work on twentieth-century and contemporary opera has appeared in the *New York Times*, *New Yorker*, *Cambridge Opera Journal*, and *American Music*. His current book project, *Making American Opera after Einstein*, centers on efforts by artists and institutions over the last forty years to redefine American opera. As a public scholar, he has given talks for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Opera Philadelphia, and Toledo Symphony Orchestra.

⁴James Steichen, "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 (2009): 25–31; see also James Steichen, "HD Opera: A Love/Hate Story," *The Opera Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (2012): 443–59.

⁵Metropolitan Opera, *Met Opera on Demand*, <http://metopera.org.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/season/on-demand/> (accessed November 30, 2021).